The Berkshire Echo

The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

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What's New?

The Record Office has acquired microfiche copies of additional indexes of births, marriages and deaths of British people overseas from the Registrar general, with the help of a donation from the Berkshire Family History Society. The indexes cover military deaths during the Boer War and First and Second World Wars, births and deaths at sea 1837-1965; civil aviation births, deaths and missing 1947-1965; and births, marriages and deaths (military and civil) for the Ionian Islands 1818-64.

If you have any old photos or family correspondence and have wondered how best to look after them, we can help. We are now selling archival standard packaging materials. These include archival copy paper, acid free folders and tissue, archive boxes, cotton tape, polyester sleeves and photograph enclosures. We are able to take orders in person and by post and the materials can be collected from the office. At the moment we are unable to send orders by post.

In November we welcomed Mark Stevens to the staff as Senior Archivist with responsibility for official records. Mark is already known to a number of staff and users as he spent time at Berkshire Record Office as a volunteer and then as Archives Assistant before training as an archivist. He has returned to Reading via Dorset and Tyne and Wear record offices.

Elizabeth Hughes

50 Glorious Years

Berkshire Record Office celebrated its 50th birthday in 1998, and to mark the occasion an evening reception and exhibition were held at the Office on 14 December. The exhibition aimed to chart something of the history of the Record Office, and to display some of the fascinating documents, from across the county, which have been deposited with it for safe keeping.

The first consideration of a county record office in Berkshire came as early as 1937, but war intervened, and the project was deferred. In 1947 the Clerk of the County Council revived the idea and persuaded members that the establishment of a county record office should not be put off any longer. His arguments were successful, though some members were reluctant, and the first County Archivist, Felix Hull, was appointed in August 1948. He inherited the records of the County Council and its predecessor, the court of Quarter Sessions, which had been stored in one of the three strongrooms built in the basement of the old Shire Hall. He was assisted by one secretary.

From these small beginnings a vast expansion has taken place. Within two years the Record Office had moved from the basement of Shire Hall to the larger premises in the basement of the Assize Courts (its strongrooms were formerly used by the County Militia for storage of arms and accoutrements). As the collections grew, so did storage needs: by 1980 records were stored in 20 different rooms in four different buildings in various parts of Reading. The situation was alleviated in 1980/81, when the Record Office moved again, this time to the new Shire Hall at Shinfield Park, and into purpose-built accommodation. Business continued to increase, and by 1994 the collections extended to over three miles of shelving and had virtually filled the available space, while the search room was becoming seriously overcrowded at busy times. Reorganisation within Shire Hall provided additional space for both but further increases in use (which has nearly doubled in the last five years) and in storage needs mean that the new Record Office building now being built is urgently needed.

Peter Durrant and Elizabeth Hughes

Towards the Move

The Record Office was closed during the first two weeks of November as usual for its annual stock-taking. This year the emphasis was on surveying the contents of the strongrooms so that we will be able successfully to re-locate the four miles of records when we move to our new premises early in the year 2000. We shall be using a computer software package called CALM 2000, which has been specially developed for and is widely used by record offices, to make the process easier. Also in connection with the move, we made considerable progress towards standardising all our catalogues into A4 format. Users of the General Register Office index will also notice new, improved year dividers.

Building work has now started on the new Record Office building in Castle Hill, Reading. It is early days yet, but so far the works are on schedule. If all goes to plan, the building should be completed by January 2000, so that we can spend February and March moving ourselves and the four miles of records in our care into the new building. The new office will have a larger search room than the present one, and an exhibition/group visits room which is badly needed. It will be necessary to close the Record Office to the public for a period of time in order for the move to take place, but we hope to keep this as short as possible. It is likely that the service will be reduced gradually during the course of the move, with access to records on film and fiche continuing longer than to original documents. Closure periods will be advertised well in advance.

Elizabeth Hughes

Charity in Reading

Records of certain Reading charities have recently been catalogued and are now available for consultation. From very early times, the mayor and corporation assumed responsibility for administering charitable bequests, whether by establishing almshouses, setting up apprenticeships, or making annual payments of money, bread or clothing. In the 19th century, partly because of instances of abuse (though none is recorded in Reading!) greater controls were imposed nationally on the reformed corporations' charity administration. The bulk of our records so far catalogued are the minutes and accounts of the Reading Municipal General and Municipal Church charities from 1837 (D/QR1 and D/QR 2), groupings of some four dozen charities established in the previous centuries.

Approximately one hundred years of charity trusteeship can be followed, but the more recent volumes, containing as they do personal information, are closed for 50 years (adults) or 75 years (children). Also of interest to the local historian will be much older documents relating to the properties with which charities were first endowed. Examples so far available are deeds to properties in Reading dating back to 1431 (John A'Larder's charity, D/QR 4), and - a wonderful discovery - a lease of the manor of Southcote of 1596 with an accompanying map (John Blagrave's charity, D/QR 7). The beautifully coloured map, the oldest in Berkshire Record Office, illustrates the division of the manor between three Blagrave brothers, and shows the moated manor house, and farm buildings, roads, lanes, watercourses and bridges. The fields between the "London Hygh Waye" (A4) and river Kennet changed little until well into this century, but the northern half has now been developed with housing, including a block of modern flats incongruously surrounded by the still surviving moat.

Bob Hale

Just Catalogued

We are pleased that in the 50th anniversary year of the National Health Service, we have been able to catalogue the records of two local hospitals. The King Edward VII Hospital in Windsor (formerly Windsor Dispensary and Windsor Royal Infirmary) was founded in 1818, as a charity providing medicine for the sick poor. Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, and her daughters the Princesses Augusta, Elizabeth and Sophia, were the first patrons, and since 1821, successive monarchs served in that role, with other members of the Royal family as President, including Prince Albert in the 1850s. At first smallpox vaccination was offered free to all-comers, with a financial incentive in the 1820s, in the anxiety to help rid the area of the scourge of this highly infectious disease. The institution was later known as Windsor Royal Infirmary. The hospital joined the NHS in 1948. The fine collection of records (D/H 6) covers the period 1818-1978, and help to illuminate local medical history. They include a register of patients, 1913-1917, which shows the impact of the decision to admit wounded soldiers straight from the Front in 1916, although this item, as with others containing medical information about named individuals is subject to 100-year closure. We have also received records from Upton Hospital, Slough, 1945-1988 (D/H 7).

Family historians will be especially pleased to hear that we have now received a register of marriages for Pangbourne parish church covering the period 1837-1935 (D/P 91). Marriage registers have also come from Radley 1991-1998 (D/P 95) and Sunningwell 1989-1997 (D/P 127), and Theale Congregational (URC) Church 1957-1987 (D/N 40). Other church records have come from East Woodhay (Highclere) Congregational Church 1925-1936 (D/N 39). An opponent's view of nonconformity is revealed in a fascinating handbill of 1810, criticising Maidenhead Congregational minister John Cooke and others for "pretending to sanctity above measure" in opposing the performance of plays by itinerant companies as part of the local celebrations of George III's golden jubilee (D/EZ 121).

The Record Office has purchased an interesting little collection of papers relating to the Martin family of Reading (and originally from the French-speaking community in the Netherlands), 1712/3-1823 (D/EZ 124). The human touch is displayed in letters to merchant Edwin Martin from his son Edwin junior, talking of his life at Oxford, and in one letter of 1764 requesting "3 or 4 Pair of Silk Stockings ... by the earliest conveyance as necessity presses my footsteps, having no others than those on my Feet." It would appear that some elements of student life have not changed!

We have also acquired deeds and papers of the Bishop family of Hamstead Park, Hamstead Marshall, 1849-1943 (D/EX 1527); an inventory of plate passed to William East of Hall Place, Hurley, on his coming of age in 1759 (D/EZ 123); and deeds of property in Cookham, 1635-1714/5, and Bray, 1679-80 (D/EX 1517); Newbury, Thatcham and Kingsclere, 1689 (D/EX 1508); Reading, 1880-1965 (D/EX 1526); and Waltham St Lawrence, 1868-1926 (D/EX 1529, 1530). The last also includes a scrapbook kept by Harold Brooks, Liberal Parliamentary candidate for South Berks in 1929, mostly relating to that campaign, but also Mr Brooks' success as a solicitor in a libel suit brought by his client Princess Irina Youssoupoff, wife of one of Rasputin's killers, against the makers of a film on the case. Some stray estate records of the Marquis of Downshire, 1774, 1817 (D/EX 1535), include the assertion that prehistoric earthwork Caesar's Camp "is of very little value, except to his Lordship, as being highly ornamental and interesting to his Estate & Mansion"!

Lisa Spurrier

An 18th Century Tracey

If you thought Tracey was a late 20th century name, you will be surprised to learn that the Caversham parish registers record the baptism on 6 July 1792 of “Tracey, D[aughte]r of William & Mary Illsley”. Reference books usually give Tracey as a derivative of Theresa, and so it appears to be in this case, for in 1819 Teresa Ilsley married William Slaughter, also in Caversham.

Lisa Spurrier

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