The
Berkshire Echo
The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

NO. 14 Winter 2000/2001

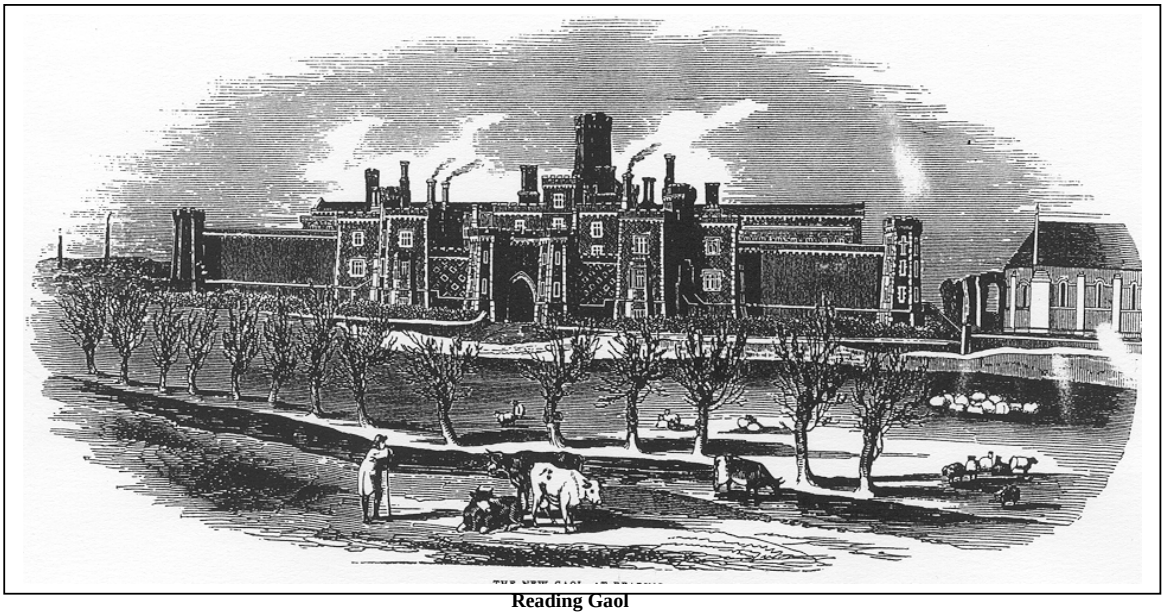
He did not wear his scarlet coat

Berkshire Record Office is commemorating the centenary of the death of Oscar Wilde by focussing not on Wilde himself but on Trooper Charles Thomas Wooldridge, the condemned man central to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

Wooldridge was born in East Garston, and met his wife Ellen in Windsor. It was at a house in Arthur Road in Windsor that he killed Ellen in a crime of passion on 29 March 1896. They had been married for only 15 months and had never lived together; Wooldridge's commanding officer in the Horse Guards would not sanction the marriage. Despite a recommendation from his jury for mercy, and petitions sent from Reading and East Garston, Wooldridge was hanged at Reading Gaol on 7 July 1896. Wilde had noticed Wooldridge in the prison exercise yard, and in his poem wrote about Wooldridge's last days and the effect of the execution on the other prisoners.

We have put on a small display in our reception area to illustrate Wooldridge's life and death. Needless to say there is more about the latter, and we have the prison execution register, the coroner's inquisition on Wooldridge's body, and a plan of the prison graves of executed men amongst other items on display.

Mark Stevens



Reading Gaol

Prostitutes and Persecution in Aldermaston

A volume described as containing miscellaneous papers can seem offputting, but can often contain some very interesting individual items. A case in point is to be found among the records of Berkshire Archdeaconry, **D/A2 b.5A**, which includes, among other things, the complaints of an 18th century curate of Aldermaston – probably originally submitted at the Archdeacon's visitation.

Zacharias Whiting complained in connection with the local almshouses that "The Intention of the Donor not fulfilled but made little better than Houses of common Prostitution". The churchwardens, he alleged, "Neglect their Duty", and the repairs for which they were responsible had been "not done". The parish clerk was in even less favour, for "After much Insolence and improper Behaviour (to be more fully explained if required) [he] refuses to sing or give out a Psalm, and carries away the Church – Instruments of Musick to play to a Company of strolling Players".

The "Morals of the Parish" were sternly criticised as "In General excessively corrupt and depraved; Prostitution connived at and encouraged – Several Women being suffered to bring Bastard after Bastard, without ever being punished, and in some Instances without being called upon to swear to the Father". The obsession with "lewd Women and Prostitutes unpunished" continued with a list of what Whiting saw as the worst offenders : Elisabeth Pike, Anne and Martha Hitchcock, Mary Gunler, Elisabeth Read and Margaret Webb, with the number of illegitimate children born to each woman. Mary Gunler had "3 or 4" such children, Margaret Webb just one, and the rest two each. Whiting attested also to the existence of "Others married and unmarried who are well known to live in a state of publick Lewdness". The curate complained also at the practice of Aldermaston parents of "calling upon the Minister to baptise new-born Infants, on Pretence of their being dangerously ill – and afterwards in many Cases the Parents refuse to bring them to Church, tho' called upon repeatedly to do it".

Whiting concluded his complaint with the statement that church repairs (perhaps because of the cost to ratepayers) and the establishment of Sunday Schools were "Two of the principal Causes of the Spite, Malevolence and Persecution which Mr Whiting experiences from his Parish of Aldermaston". The document is undated but is likely to be between 1768 and the 1790s.

Lisa Spurrier

Survey of visitors to UK archives

Some of you might remember that we took part in a national survey of British archive users in October 1999, and that we handed out questionnaires to visitors throughout that month asking questions about our services. We now have the results of the survey and they have proved very useful as we endeavour to continuously improve the services we offer. We will be participating in the next survey too, which will be in February.

Most of you (83%) use the Record Office for pleasure (!) rather than business; this fits with the fact that most of you are also retired. Over two-thirds of you use microform sources. Although almost all of you are happy with the service we provide, we were broadly middle-ranked amongst English local authority archives in terms of user satisfaction.

The most popular improvements we could make were to our visitor facilities (48% of you wanted this), our microform viewing area (42%) and our opening hours (30%). This 'wish list' relates of course to when we were at Shire Hall, and we will be interested to hear what you have to say about the new building in February.

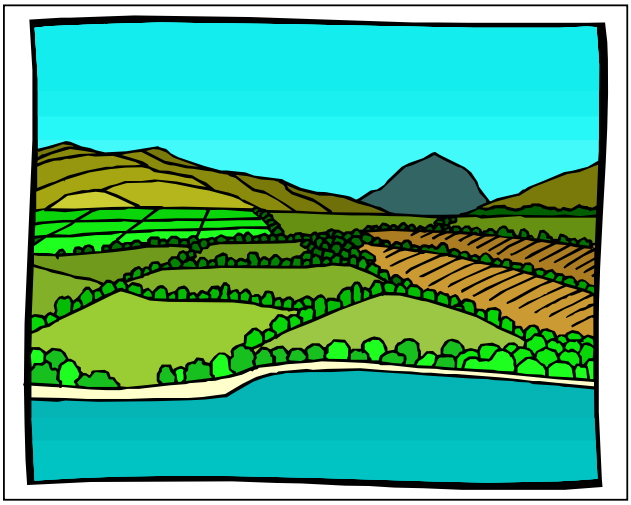
Mark Stevens

New Faces

A warm welcome goes to our two new archive assistants. Jane Powell joined the searchroom team in November, and is on duty in the afternoons, and Julie Grisman joins us every morning from January.

Lisa Spurrier

Stop Press



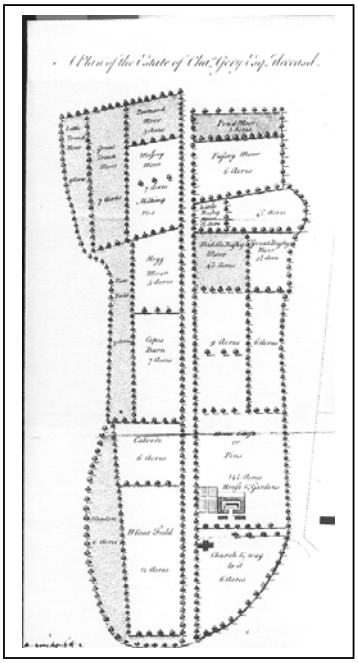
A major new study of the enclosure movement in Berkshire has just been published by Berkshire Record Society. Drawing heavily on records in Berkshire Record Office, it traces the process of enclosure in the historic county of Berkshire over four centuries from 1485. *Enclosure in Berkshire, 1485-1885*, is available from the Record Office, price £25 (plus £2 p&p). A full review will appear in the next issue of the *Berkshire Echo*

Peter Durrant

Just Catalogued

We have started our cataloguing programme after the move by concentrating mainly on the ever popular parish records. The most exciting of these come from South Moreton (D/P 87), and cover the period 1783-1994, including the marriage register from 1837 to 1978 and burials 1905-1994, and some extremely detailed overseers' accounts and poor rates for 1790-1808. Sadly these last are at present in too fragile a state to see, but we hope to include them in our microfilming programme soon. The second volume includes note of an agreement with Robert Clark, a Wallingford surgeon, for him to attend the poor of South Moreton as surgeon, apothecary and in emergencies as a "man midwife". The Parochial Church Council minutes are also of interest in the discussion in 1978 of the ordination of women; the parish as a whole were enthusiastic, but the incumbent could not agree with them! The records of Letcombe Regis, 1837-1992 (D/P 81) include the marriage register, 1837-1980. Also of special interest is the detailed estimate for the repair of the church clock in 1864, which has the comment that "The above alterations will make it a Valueable Clock and a great boon to the Village as the Clock would indicate the correct time." More recent marriage registers have also come in from Longworth (D/P 83, 1968-1984) and Charney Bassett (D/P 83B, 1984-1999). There is also a register of services for Ardington parish church, 1971-1994 (D/P 7). Finally, we have received some interesting papers relating to the building of Speenhamland church in 1829, and to major alterations in 1876-1890 and 1911 (D/P 116B). There is an especially detailed specification of the works carried out in 1911.

The other interesting collection to have been made available is a small deposit of deeds relating to property in Arborfield, 1722-1736; Barkham, 1722-1784, including Barkham Court, 1745-1759; Finchampstead, 1820-1843; and Wokingham, 1690-1784; plus some miscellaneous papers, 1732-1858, including some trust deeds involving members of the Walter family, owners of the *Times* newspaper (D/EX 1621). The most unusual item is an exceptionally early printed sales particular, with plan (reproduced right), of Barkham Court, dated 1755. It describes the property as "very Improveable", and the plan also shows the parish church.



We have also added searchroom transcripts of the registers of Compton and baptism and marriage registers for Shrivenham to our holdings in the searchroom.

Lisa Spurrier

Berkshire Record Office, 9 Coley Avenue, Reading RG1 6AF.
Tel. 0118-901-5132 Fax 0118-901-5131 E-mail ARCH@Reading.gov.uk