The
Berkshire Echo
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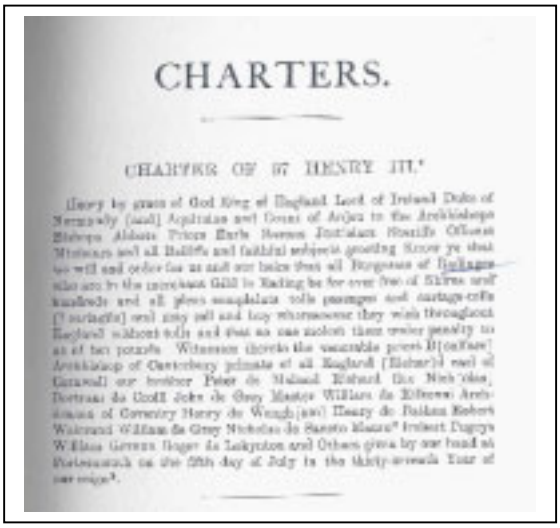
Charter 750



CHARTERS.

CHARTER OF 37 HENRY III.

On 5 July 1253 the royal seal was affixed to a document of historic significance for the town of Reading. This was Reading's first royal charter, granting to the town's merchant gild important commercial privileges, in particular the right 'to buy and sell wheresoever they wish throughout England without tolls'. Though the town was not new in 1253, this charter marked a momentous step in its development, giving it a measure of independence from the Abbey (with which in the following year it negotiated a ground-breaking agreement), and confirming the gild's status as a commercial and administrative body.

Further charters followed, notably those of 1542, which converted the merchant gild into a corporation, 1560, which allowed it to buy land and which defined the borough boundaries, and 1638, which granted it a court of quarter sessions and a coroner.

Berkshire Record Office is celebrating the 750th anniversary of this event with an exhibition running from charter day through to September. Several original charters will be on display, and staff have selected a number of other documents from the town's archives (including a mediaeval account roll and the seventeenth-century freemen's admission book) to show some of the riches of the collection.

Complementing these will be some silver and other items from the collection in the mayor's parlour, and some artefacts kindly loaned by the Museum Service. A series of specially commissioned boards will describe key events in the development of the town from its pre-Domesday origins to its present day position as a thriving regional capital. The exhibition will be launched at a reception on 2 July, hosted by the Mayor in the presence of the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire, and on charter day itself the exhibition will be open to the public from 11.00 am to 3.00 pm.

Peter Durrant

Dates for your diary

The charter exhibition may also be seen during normal opening hours. Don't forget that we are open for a glimpse behind the scenes on Saturday 13 September from 1-4 p.m., as part of the national Heritage Open Day programme.

Newbury on the eve of Waterloo

I was thrilled to discover that the records of the Toomer family of Newbury, mentioned in the last issue, included one quite extraordinary item – a full scale census of the town taken on the eve of Waterloo in 1815 by Joseph Toomer, mayor of Newbury (D/EX 1718/7/3). It may have been inspired by the official censuses of 1801 and 1811, but appears to include more detail than these recorded.

Toomer appears to have personally visited every address in Newbury (1096 houses) between 20 May and 9 June, and made enquiries as to the names and "supposed ages" of the residents (over 5000 in all), and the occupation of the head of household, plus servants or apprentices living in. Occasionally additional material has been provided, such as date of birth, the name of an employer, incapacity such as blindness or deafness, widowhood, or relationship in the case of stepchildren.

In 1815 the town hosted a regiment of soldiers, billetted in twos and threes in the various public houses of the town (of which there were 37). There were also visiting salesmen, some with foreign names. The census is accompanied by a neatly drawn sketch map of the town, showing the location of every yard (the locations of many houses off the main streets). In order to protect the rather fragile original book, a microfiche copy has been made for consultation, which means copies can be made, and I have also compiled an index (available in the searchroom, reference T/B 77).

Toomer (and later his family) continued to update the census occasionally up to 1878 by adding pencil dates of, and ages at, death, of some persons, and the names of later occupants of particular premises. Joseph Toomer's entry for himself reveals that he was an ironmonger, aged 55, living in the Market Place. He adds the information that he was born on 3 February 1760, and another hand adds that he died on 23 December 1853. Although he does not mention the fact, he was at this time in his third term as mayor, having served the office in 1791-2 and 1801-2 as well as 1814-5.

While at first sight Joseph Toomer's census appears to include precise ages (an advance on the information supplied in official census returns before 1851) a closer look at the details reveals considerable rounding up; clearly it is quite impossible that there were 122 people in Newbury aged 40, but only 25 aged 39 and 24 aged 41. This approximation of ages is at its most common in the years immediately before and after ages divisible by 10. One can estimate, however, that there were 2352 persons under 20, of whom 179 attended private boarding schools, usually coming from outside the area; 1392 aged between 20 and 39; 847 between 40 and 59; 441 between 60 and 79; 55 over 80, though few were over 85); and 6 aged 90 or over.

Five babies were so young they had not been named, including the daughter of Thomas and Susanna Smith of East Field, off Mary Hill, "just born whilst I was enquiring" on 22 May 1815. Newbury's juvenile population is slightly distorted by the existence of five private boarding schools in the town, which attracted 179 boys and girls aged from 5 to 18 from as far afield as the West Indies. The youngest person to be in work was a 10 year old working as a servant. A very small number of the town's young people were apprenticed (just 23 of the 823 youths aged from 13 to 20). The oldest person in Newbury was 95 year old Mary Kimber, who like the other four aged over 90, lived in almshouses; 90 year old Susanna Baker still lived independently in Bartholomew Street with her 86 year old husband John, a cooper, the oldest person recorded as in employment. Many were working well into their seventies.

Lisa Spurrier

New fees and charges from 1 July 2003

We are making some changes to our fees for copying services. Unfortunately for the first time in 5 years we have had to increase some of these fees. We have tried to keep this to a minimum, and have used the opportunity to abolish handling charges on photocopy and printout orders. Please note the new fees which are:

- 50p per photocopy or printout (processed by staff) ordered in the searchroom
- £3 for one photocopy or printout (processed by staff) ordered by phone/mail (and £1 for each subsequent sheet)

The price of self-service printouts remains 40p.

Introduction of self-service photography

We are also pleased to announce that from 1 July we will be allowing visitors to take photographs of documents with their own cameras. We hope that this will prove very popular.

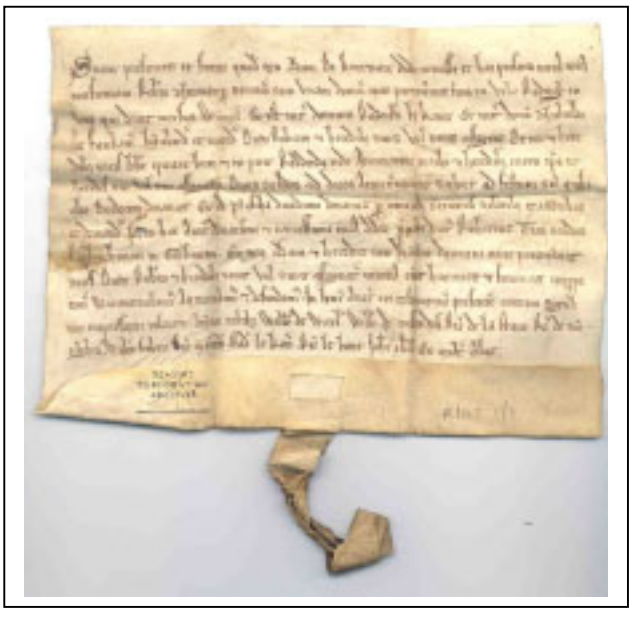
There are certain things we will ask you to do if you wish to take your own photographs. We will ask you to sign a copyright declaration, and to pay a fee of £2 for each photograph you take. We will insist on flash-free cameras, and reserve the right to say 'no' to photography if the searchroom is too busy to allow us to supervise it properly. We regret also that we will be unable to produce documents which are on film or fiche solely for them to be photographed. But … we receive a lot of comments asking us to let you use your own cameras, and we hope you find it useful for your research.

Mark Stevens

Just catalogued

The highlight of recent cataloguing activity is the completion of a list and detailed calendar of Reading Borough's collection of medieval deeds (R/AT 1). There are almost 200 of these, apparently relating to property which later came into the hands of the Corporation, and most in Reading. The oldest (*pictured right*) is undated, but probably about 1230 in date, and is for a house in the street leading towards Winchester, by which Wood Street or Southampton Street is meant. One of the most interesting is the latest in date, the 1534 lease of the borough's newly built "Weighing House for yarn", where there hung a special beam for checking the quality of woollen yarn offered for sale in the town.

This house was situated in Cheese Row, which was the part of Broad Street between Cross Street and the Butter Market.



The Methodist records cataloguing project continues with the completion of catalogues for the following churches: Caversham Heights Wesleyan, 1909-2000 (D/MS 30) (*pictured below right)*; Chaddleworth Wesleyan, 1850-20 cent., including baptisms, 1850-1868 (D/MS 31); Chilton Foliat Wesleyan, 1847-1947 (D/MS 32); Cippenham, 1955-1965 (D/MS 33); Cold Ash Primitive, 1916-1948 (D/MS 34); Compton Primitive, 1909-1979 (D/MS 35); Cookham Rise Wesleyan, 1904-1981, including baptisms, 1967-1978 (D/MS 36); Cookham Wesleyan, 1872-1914 (only a baptism register) (D/MS 37); Cox Green Primitive, 1874-1918 (D/MS 38); Curridge Primitive, 1840-1944 (D/MS 39); East Garston Primitive, 1951-1977 (D/MS 40); East Garston Wesleyan, 1869-1936 (D/MS 41); Hampstead Norreys Wesleyan, 1803-1960 (D/MS 42); and Holyport Wesleyan, 1923-1962 (D/MS 43).

Other nonconformist activity is recorded in deeds of property in the Armour Hill area of Tilehurst, which were recently given to the Record Office (D/EX 1804). The premises include a chapel built in 1835 by a group describing themselves as Trinitarian Dissenters, one of whom was the Revd William Legg, the Independent minister at Reading's Broad Street Chapel. It had fallen out of use by the 1880s. Additional parish records have arrived from Reading St Giles, 1898-2002 (D/P 96), including registers of baptisms, 1899-1990, marriages, 1898-1991, and funerals, 1955-1990.

An important collection of business records has arrived from Whitbread plc (D/EX 1668). This consists of the records of two Berkshire breweries, S H Higgs Ltd of Reading, 1937-1960s, and Strange & Sons of Aldermaston, 1818-1999, with deeds of public houses tied to two others, Henry Bird & Sons of Reading, 1738-1867, and Thomas Wethered & Sons of Marlow, Buckinghamshire, 1580-1983. Also now available for research are the records of S & E Collier Ltd of Reading, brick and tile makers, 1902-1964 (R/D 130).

Finally, newly listed material from Old Windsor Parish Council, 1886-1994 (CPC 150), includes the minutes of a committee established to co-ordinate local celebrations of the Coronation in 1953. There are also records of the Church Road Cemetery, 1886-1972.

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 *Website* www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk
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