The
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The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

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Best value review

Our best value review was completed earlier this year and the improvement plan endorsed in June by Reading Borough Council on behalf of the six unitaries. The plan will take us through the next 5 years. The four main thrusts of it are to look to improve the services we currently provide; increase awareness of us and what we do; develop partnerships with museums and libraries to deliver services; and achieve electronic access to our catalogues and eventually to images of archives themselves.

What will this mean in practice? We will be working to review how we help visitors and enquirers to the Office over the next 5 years, but we will also be looking beyond the building to see what we can provide for people who will never visit us. We will also give a higher priority to marketing what we do, to ensure people have heard of us and what we can offer.

This will translate into various visible actions. For example, we've restructured slightly within the Office, and you may have noticed different duty patterns as a result. This year we will review the copying services we provide, including the fee structure (if you have any views on this please fill in a comment form). We'll be writing more press releases, and so on.

If you want to have a copy of the improvement plan, please let us know. It will also be available on our website.

Peter Durrant

Stocktaking and Staff News

We will be closed for our annual stocktaking for the first fortnight in November. We close at 4.30 on Friday 1 November, and reopen on Tuesday 19 November.

There are several new faces to report. Philip Wilson has joined the team of Archive Assistants, and will be responsible for the majority of document production to the searchroom. Wilma Grant has been appointed to the new post of Business Support Officer to help with behind-the-scenes administration. Jane Chedzey has joined the NOF inclosure records digitisation project for three months, and archivist Lindsay McCormack has been appointed to undertake a major project over the next nine months working on Berkshire Education Department records. Former Reading Reference Librarian David Cliffe joins us as Local Studies Manager, based partly at the Record Office and partly at Reading Library.

We said goodbye to searchroom assistant Janet Wardell, and to Modern Records Centre supervisor Solange Fitzgerald, who had been helping us out with conservation in recent months and has secured a job in the conservation team at the Public Record Office.

Lisa Spurrier

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Eternal Vows: Or A Faithless Old Swain?

A contender for the county's longest engagement emerged in the following 19th century account estate (D/EX 1332/4/2), found among the records of Sparsholt manor mentioned in the *Just Catalogued* section of our last issue.

"During the greater part of the last Century The Sparsholt House and Estate were possessed by Mr Richmond. He married so early in life that there was little more than 20 years difference between him, and his only daughter, and Heiress.
When she was about eighteen, a Regiment of Cavalry were quartered either at Wantage, or in a Neighbouring Market Town. The Cornet, named Gabbet, a fine dashing young Irishman (a Soldier of fortune so called, which may be interpreted no fortune at all) was frequently invited, with the other Officers, to Mr Richmond's Table, and the consequence was, an attachment between Cornet G and Miss R, followed by an engagement; which when discovered by Mr Richmond, threw him into an agony of passion – He threatened to disinherit his daughter, & turned the Cornet out of doors – Not however till eternal vows of constancy had been exchanged, & a regular correspondence arranged, & this was faithfully kept up till Mr Richmond's death.

During a period of 50 years the Lovers never met. The Lady living in solitary grandeur and the Soldier passing through the vicissitude[s] of War, & Climate, till he rose to the rank of General. When Miss Richmond had reached the age of 74 her father died, & on the very day the event took place, the Heiress wrote to inform her Lover that she was at liberty to offer him her hand & fortune if he still remained firm to his early feelings.

As soon after the receipt of the letter as four Post-Horses, & the intolerable roads in those days (about 1780) would allow, the Gallant General arrived to claim the hand held out to him. No time was lost, & before the Funeral took place the Bridal attire was ordered – the direction given being – "What was proper for a Mourning Bride". The Marriage took place, and Mrs Gabbet received her company attired in White Crape, with black Ornaments.

The Lady, however, did not live more than three or four weeks after the Marriage Ceremony. She was taken off rather suddenly, & left the General in full possession of her ample fortune to console his bereavement, & verify the old Proverb, "that a fat lover is better than a lean one" – His grief led him to change the scene for a short time,

When he returned, accompanied by his soi-disant Niece, and her two boys, Eleven & Twelve years old. The Lady had passed the bloom of youth, but was handsome and agreeable. After the proper time had elapsed the Gen[era]l began to give parties. Mrs S was considered a very pleasant person, but her manners were thought a little too free for the decorum of her County Neighbours. By degrees suspicion being strongly awakened, led to the more minute enquiries as to the assumed relationship of the parties, the result of which was that the Lady had long been the Chere-amie of the faithless old Swain, and the two boys were the Generals Sons.

The Storm of indignation that ensued may easily be imagined, and from that time they lived in comparative retirement till the General died, which was not many years after his Wife. He left the property to his eldest Son who grew up a most dissipated young Man, & died at an early age, leaving the estate much incumbered, to his younger Brother, who died soon after he had attained his Majority. The Estate was sold to pay his debts."

Not all the information in this document is precisely accurate – a salutary warning against relying on oral history! The aged couple, Joseph Gabbit (which seems to be the correct spelling of the name) and Alethea Richmond, were married by licence in Sparsholt parish church on 30 May 1785 (D/P 115/1/4). Alethea's father, Seymour Richmond, had died more than six months earlier and was buried on 12 November 1784. Alethea survived more than seven months of marriage, being buried on 15 January 1786. Joseph himself died in 1794, and was buried on 30 November. His son Thomas died at the age of 24 in 1807, the year the estate was sold to the Hippisley family. This means that he would have been born in 1782-3, later than the other document suggests. (D/P115/1/2).

Lisa Spurrier

A Brazilian in Berkshire

Recently spotted in the Hurley register of burials was the burial on 17 September 1823 of "Le Commandeur Hippolyto Joseph da Costa Chargé d'Affaires to the Emperor of Brazil". Senhor da Costa was at the time resident in Kensington, Middlesex.

Lisa Spurrier

Recipe for long and healthy life: sugared toast and ale

I found this written by the Revd Barfoot Colton in the Shrivenham burial register (D/P 112/1/11):

"On the 5th day of January 1788 died Thomas Smith of Bourton in this Parish Yeoman aged 100 Years & 7 weeks. He was the last of a very ancient and respectable Family of that Name at Bourton. He lived the last 40 Years of His life, chiefly on sugar'd toast and ale, which was His constant breakfast. He was a short thickset Man, and bore no great Marks of Age, scarce a wrinkle in His face even to the Time of His Death. He never knew any Illness, and has assured Me He never took any sort of Physick but twice in His life.
N.B. His Baptism is recorded in the old Register.
Mr Smith left a Widow now aged 90 Years and two Months Sept[embe]r ye 18th 1788"

Jane Powell

Just catalogued

The most exciting discovery we have to report is probably that of the East Compton inclosure map and award of 1741 (D/EX 1645), discovered languishing in an antique shop by TV archaeologist Julian Richards. Sale particulars of the Coley Park estate in Reading, 1937 (D/EX 1724), and the Crookham House estate in Thatcham, 1939 (D/EX 1701), record the breakup of two big local estates. We have also recently acquired deeds of houses in Reading, 1956-1961 (D/EX 1698) and Wallingford, 1749 (D/EX 1696). A miscellaneous collection of documents covering the period 1847-1944 (D/EX 1742) includes deeds of property in Reading, 1888-1922, abstracts of Reading Borough accounts, c1847-1857, and plans marked "Secret" showing tank transporter routes in the South of England during World War II. A interesting set of publications of Berkshire Agricultural Committee, c1916-1938 (D/EX 1738) has been catalogued; they include a report on women in agriculture in France during World War I (at the time of the Battle of Verdun) and various field trial and egg-laying competition reports. Also deposited recently were the minutes of the Reading Horticultural and Allotment Federation, 1940-1944 (D/EX 1747).

Voluntary activities in 20th century Berkshire are highlighted by the recently catalogued records of the Tilehurst Eisteddfod (a competitive arts festival), 1954-2000 (D/EX 1474), Reading Afternoon Townswomen's Guild, 1948-2001 (D/EX 1753) and the Reading branch of International Voluntary Service, 1961-1973 (D/EX 1744). This last organisation co-ordinated voluntary work, mainly helping the elderly or disabled with decorating or repairs. Their biggest project was the construction of an adventure playground in Whitley.

Family historians will be pleased to learn of the recent deposit of the Buscot parish registers of baptisms, 1873-2002, and burials, 1950-2000 (D/P 30), Purley marriage registers, 1838-1994 (D/P 93), and the Coleshill marriage register, 1981-1998 (D/P 40). The parish of Hermitage has made a substantial new deposit of records, 1839-1998, including its earliest registers (baptisms 1839-1915, marriages 1839-1990 and burials 1840-1978) (D/P 62B).

Parish records have also come in from Great Coxwell (*left*), 1783-2002, including registers of marriages, 1981-1992, and burials, 1941-2002, and plans of the 1881 restoration (D/P 44), and from Hurley, 1722-1948, including plans of the church's restoration in 1851-1853 (D/P 72). Wokingham St Sebastian has made its first deposit of records, 1864-2001, again including the earliest registers, in this case baptisms 1864-1977, marriages 1865-1961 and burials 1866-2002 (the last too fragile for consultation until it is microfilmed) (D/P154C). Newbury United Reformed Church has deposited some additional material, 1939-2001 (D/N 32).

We have acquired some additional plans and drawings from Huntley, Boorne & Stevens of Reading, tin box manufacturers, 1878-1959 (D/EX 1745). Work at the related company Huntley & Palmers, the famous biscuit makers, is revealed in the papers of Celia May Newby, nee Edwards, c1907-1992 (D/EX 1748). Mrs Newby worked for the firm's technical development section for many years, and her papers include a 1938 staff manual which reveals that female staff were obliged to wear stockings and regulation overalls for hygiene purposes. All employees and pensioners of the firm were allowed a free weekly bag of broken biscuits, and to purchase additional biscuits at list price. The lunch break was a generous hour and a half. Tea and biscuits were provided in the afternoon, while milk was available in one-third pint bottles, with straw (at 1d each) during the morning break. It was firmly forbidden "to loiter in the lavatories or elsewhere in business hours". A later staff manual (1964) had replaced the milk supply with tea and biscuits at both breaks, but loitering in the lavatories was still forbidden. Employees with five years service were entitled to a free wedding cake on getting married. A particularly fascinating item in the collection is the 1938 Christmas brochure, which includes some extremely gaudy (often pink) and some sickly pale blue icing on Christmas cakes, as well as the latest designs of biscuit tin. There is also material relating to Mrs Newby's lifelong involvement with St Luke's Church, Reading.

The customer accounts of Steventon grocer George Rant, 1878-1892, have been catalogued (D/EX 1754). Also new are 20th century papers of the Miles family of Caversham, gardeners (D/EX 1750), and a memoir relating to the setting up of the *Newbury Weekly News*, written in 1917 by founder Thomas Wheildon Turner (D/EX 1755). Finally, now available for research are some early 20th century glass negatives of Bray Lock and Ferry and Windsor Great Park (D/EX 1571); a report of a coursing meeting at Ashdown Park, Ashbury, 1836 (D/EZ 140); a poster advertising an entertainment at Reading Town Hall in aid of the Serbian Relief Fund in 1915 (D/EX 1734); and sale particulars of land in Bracknell, 1874 (D/EX 1733).

Lisa Spurrier

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