The
Berkshire Echo

Berkshire Record Office Newsletter Issue 33 Autumn 2005

This edition of the Echo is themed on 'Beginnings' to coincide with the Archive Awareness Campaign 2005.

The beginnings of Berkshire Record Office

Berkshire County Council established a temporary depository for manorial records in the Old Shire Hall in the Forbury, Reading in 1936.

Old Shire Hall, Forbury, Reading

By 1939, it was deemed necessary to employ a full-time County Archivist to maintain the records. Unfortunately the Second World War intervened and it was not until 1948 that Felix Hull became Berkshire's first County Archivist.

Reading Assize Courts

In 1952, the archives were moved to the basement of the Reading Assize Courts. Although better than previous accommodation, it was not ideal as the strongrooms, searchroom and staff offices were scattered and fairly small. Despite this, it was not until 1980/1981 that the Record Office moved again to the new Shire Hall at Shinfield Park.

Shire Hall, Shinfield Park

There have been 5 county archivists since Dr Hull. Dr Peter Durrant, the current County Archivist, took over in 1988. In the first year of the Record Office there were merely 180 visitors; compare that with the 7783 visitors in 2004/2005!

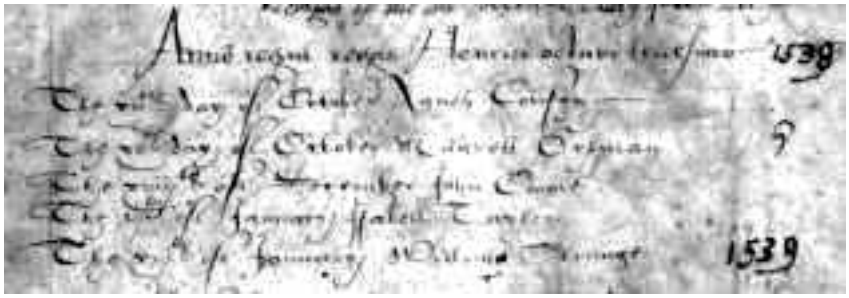
Coley Avenue, Reading

In 2000/2001 the Record Office moved to its current location in Coley Avenue, Reading. The aim of the Record Office has remained, as it was when it began in 1948, 'to locate and preserve records relating to the county of Berkshire and its people, and to make them available for research to anyone who is interested in the county's past'.

Ivone Turnbull

East Hendred got in first

In the Record Office you can wait ages for a parish register to turn up and then 3 come along at once. So it was when the very first registers were deposited with the Office on 6 May 1949. A full year after the Office had opened, on that spring Friday the incumbents of East Hendred, Brightwell and Sotwell brought their earliest registers in to the old Shire Hall. Felix Hull, then County Archivist, duly accorded East Hendred the honour of being our first parish register.



Ref. D/P 66/1/1

Connoisseurs will note that it is a classic of its kind: parchment leaves with a limp parchment cover, begun in 1558 but with entries copied in from 1538 - it even has a 20 year gap in the middle when one of the incumbents lost interest. Since that day over 1500 other registers have been deposited with us, but East Hendred got in first.

Mark Stevens

The first female doctor in Berkshire

Most people would say that the first female doctor in Britain was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in the 19th century. We can exclusively reveal here that in fact a Berkshire woman beat her to it 200 years earlier!

From 1512, all persons wishing to practise medicine or surgery in England were required by law to register at the church courts. I was surprised to spot the following request on behalf of a woman from west Berkshire in the records of the Berkshire Archdeaconry (D/A2/c162 f21):

'These are to certifie whom It concerns that Bridget The wife of Francis Sherwood of Donington in the parish of Shaw cum Donnington in the Archdeaconry of Berks is a person fitt to exercise her skill in the practice of physick & chirurgery *[surgery]* having formerly done much good in the parish aforesaid & in the places adiacent.'

The certificate was signed by Henry Pierse, rector of Shaw-cum-Donnington, and dated 9 October 1663. Pierse (spelt Peirce in printed sources) had been rector of Shaw since 1661. He was a 43 year old widower, who was about to marry again. Perhaps due to Mr Pierse's recommendation, Bridget was granted her licence – a very rare (though I believe not unique) instance of a woman being allowed to act in such a role, and certainly the first female doctor recorded in Berkshire.

The rarity of Bridget's example is illustrated by the 18th century official who compiled lists of the various certificates granted by the archdeacon and his predecessors (D/A2/c65). He wrongly listed her name among the midwives (who

were similarly licensed by the Church, under another statute) rather than the surgeons and doctors – obviously having seen her name and not imagining a woman could be classed in the latter section!

I have not been able to trace Bridget's maiden name or establish her age. Her youngest children (twin daughters who died soon after birth) were baptised in 1656, and she was almost certainly married before 1646, when the earliest parish registers survive for Shaw-cum-Donnington. Bridget was widowed in 1673, and died in 1688. An educated guess might estimate her as being perhaps in her 40s or 50s at the time she was licensed. Rather more speculatively, one may wonder whether Bridget might have helped to treat the wounded after the Battles of Newbury near her home during the Civil War.

Lisa Spurrier

Just Catalogued

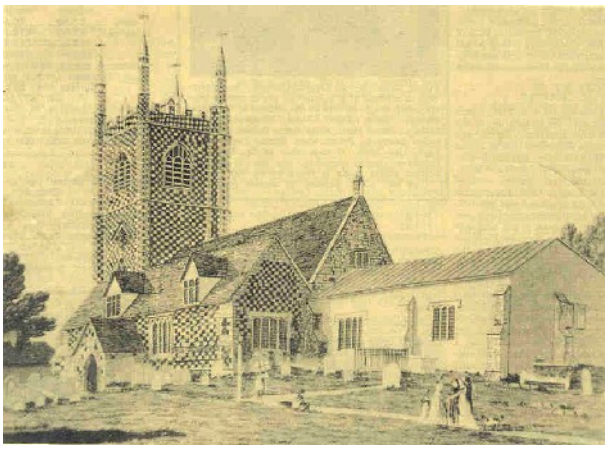
We can report the culmination of another major cataloguing project in this issue, namely the extensive archive of Reading Municipal Charities (D/QR). This body incorporates more than 30 charities founded for the people of Reading, variously providing almshouses, food, clothing and fuel for the poor, education (including the Blue Coat School for boys and the Green Girls' School), apprenticeship, and dowries for poor girls. The records of the charity founded in the 1640s by Reading-born William Laud, a controversial Archbishop of Canterbury, are among the most interesting, as they include around 300 medieval deeds, most relating to the property in Bray with which he endowed the charity.

An unusual but fascinating document we have acquired is a copy (called an inspeximus) made in 1582 of an original royal grant issued in 1458 of the (lucrative) right to hold a fair in Finchampstead on the Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday of Pentecost every year (D/EX 1906). The original grant was witnessed by members of King Henry VI's court including the archbishops of Canterbury and York, and the king's cousin Richard Duke of York, whose son was to depose Henry three years later. The fair may have lapsed, or some doubt arisen as to who was entitled to hold it, and the issue of the inspeximus would have acted as a confirmation of the right.

The full and detailed records of Wallingford Rural District Council (RD/W) have recently been transferred here. The Council provided many local government functions for the area around Wallingford, including Didcot, although (perhaps confusingly) not the borough of Wallingford itself, 1894-1974. Before the establishment of the National Health Service, the council dealt with contagious diseases, and during the war it managed the evacuation scheme, air raid precautions etc. At various dates it was responsible for housing (both planning applications and the provision of council houses), water supply and sewage, and fire brigades.

We have also received the minutes of the Council's predecessor, Wallingford Rural Sanitary Authority, which dealt with matters of public health, drainage etc, 1872-1894, and included the Crowmarsh area of Oxfordshire (RS/W). We have also acquired the minutes of Wokingham Rural Sanitary Authority, 1887-1894 (RS/WO). Records have also arrived from Stratfield Mortimer (CPC 120) and Sunninghill (CPC

126) Parish Councils, the latter including 20th century records of Sunninghill Burial Ground.



St Mary's Church, Reading

Parish records have come in from Bracknell Holy Trinity (D/P 165); Burghfield, including the burial register, 1871-2005 (D/P 29); Littlewick (D/P 179); Priestwood (D/P 165B); Reading Holy Trinity (D/P 171); Reading St Mary (D/P 98); Remenham (D/P 99); and Dry Sandford (D/P 184). Particularly interesting was the 1930s vicar of Remenham who filled his service register with his comments on national and international affairs, including the Italians' "diabolical" use of poison gas in Ethiopia, and the persecution of Jews in Germany and Austria.

Henley Methodist Church

Additional records have also come from Tilehurst (D/MS 76) and Henley-on-Thames (D/MS 104) Methodist Churches, including the latter's register of baptisms, 1874-2002.

Lisa Spurrier

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