Minutes of the Standing Conference on Archives held at the Royal Berkshire Archives on Friday 21 June 2024 at 2pm

Present: David Cliffe (Berkshire Local History Association), Cllr Stephen Conway (Wokingham Borough Council, Chairman), Joan Dils (Berkshire Record Society), Cllr Nigel Foot (West Berkshire Council), Felicity Harrison (West Berkshire Council), Angela Huisman (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Jacquie Kavanagh (Diocese of Oxford), Donna Pentelow (Reading Borough Council), Catherine Sampson (Berkshire Family History Society), Mark Stevens (Royal Berkshire Archives), Cllr John Story (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Cllr Liz Terry (Reading Borough Council), Ivone Turnbull (Royal Berkshire Archives, minutes), Dr Jacqui Turner (University of Reading)

Apologies: Cllr Guy Gillbe (Bracknell Forest Council), Cllr Neel Rana (Slough Borough Council), Jules Spanner (Berks, Bucks and Oxon Law Society)

1 Election of chairman for the municipal year

Cllr Stephen Conway had offered to act as Chairman for the municipal year. Cllr John Story proposed and all present agreed.

2 Minutes of the meeting held 24 November 2023

The minutes were agreed and signed.

Matters arising:

1 Digitisation of parish registers: Cllr John Story asked about the extent of the free Ancestry resources available to council libraries. Mark Stevens confirmed that it was access to the entirety of Ancestry's worldwide subscription material.

3 Annual report 2023/24

Mark Stevens highlighted the following aspects of the report:

- The new name for the service, together with the associated Royal visit and 75th anniversary exhibition, which made for a key year in the Archives' own history

- Many additions to the collections, including through the support of kind grants and donations
- Production of descriptive catalogues for numerous collections, including the international welfare work of the Community of St John Baptist
- Completion of the externally-funded Bracknell New Town cataloguing and Thames Conservancy conservation projects
- Award of a grant to deliver school sessions around historical rural diversity and the story of George Freeman
- Being reaccredited by The National Archives and retaining the statutory licence as a place of deposit.

Mark Stevens informed members that there would be an event on 16 September 2024 to display the finished artwork and creative writing from the diversity sessions. Members would be invited to attend.

Mark Stevens extended his thanks to staff for all their hard work and to Standing Conference for their ongoing support of the Archives.

The Chairman recorded his thanks to Mark Stevens and the Archives staff for all their achievements during the year. Standing Conference concurred.

Jacquie Kavanagh asked if the permissions issue for the Church of England's plans to digitise parish registers in the National Burial Grounds Survey had been resolved. Mark Stevens replied that it had not, but that the Church of England was belatedly engaging with local archive services on the matter.

Catherine Sampson asked if the Archives would receive a copy of the digitised images created by Ancestry. Mark Stevens confirmed that it would.

4 Capital works update

Mark Stevens reported that the revised extension budget had been approved by all six councils. Emily Owles had been appointed as project officer by West Berkshire Council and begun work on the project. Emily would be invited to attend the next Standing Conference meeting to provide an update and answer questions.

Felicity Harrison stated that West Berkshire was in the process of agreeing a payment plan for contributions from the other five councils.

Cllr Liz Terry asked for a summary of the planning situation. Mark Stevens reported that permission for a two-storey extension on the east wing of the building had been approved in August 2022. Since then, efforts had been directed at getting the revised

budget agreed. Cllr Nigel Foot noted that planning applications were valid for three years so some form of visible work would be required by August 2025.

Cllr John Story asked if present storage capacity had been reached since the application was approved. Mark Stevens replied that it had for some sizes of material, and that the Archives had been repurposing shelves. This had an impact on space efficiency but meant no collection had been turned away. Space restrictions would become an increasing issue and the target remained to complete the extension before the existing capacity was exhausted. It was anticipated that organic material would continue to be deposited until at least the end of this century, though the expectation was that quantity would diminish slowly over that time.

The Chairman asked how many years' storage would be supplied by the extension. Mark Stevens confirmed that it had been planned to provide capacity until at least 2060. This calculation was based on the average rate of accrual since the Archives had moved to Coley Avenue.

5 Digital repository

Ivone Turnbull updated Standing Conference on the recent launch of public access to digital collections. This followed several years' work to obtain digital storage to archival standards and then to design an online site where digital material could be requested to view.

The launch of digital access could be seen as a similar event to the service's public opening 75 years ago. Currently, the amount of viewable items was small, but they would continue to grow and soon become a standard way to access collections.

Jacquie Kavanagh asked if the Archives could take in digital records in any file type. Mark Stevens confirmed that yes, in theory, any existing or obsolete file type could be stored and made available to view.

Catherine Sampson asked if the Archives could provide advice to local clubs and societies on digital record-keeping. Ivone Turnbull replied that clubs and societies were welcome to ask for advice.

6 Ministry of Justice consultation on wills documents

Mark Stevens reported that on 15 December 2023, the Ministry of Justice announced a public consultation on its proposal to digitise probate documents from 1858 onwards and destroy the originals. This had met with almost universal criticism and The National Archives and Chief Archivists in Local Government had encouraged

individual services to respond to it. The Archives had drafted a response, which Archives Board had approved before its submission.

A Government response to the consultation had been expected by the end of summer, but it was possible that the general election would impact that timetable.

7 Any other business

Dr Jacqui Turner recorded her thanks for the continued support of the Archives and the Berkshire Local History Association for the university's Berkshire dissertation prize. This year's dissertation looked at the women's suffrage movement in Reading and had also been submitted for a national prize.

Dr Jacqui Turner also noted that 2026 would be the centenary year of the University of Reading's charter. A blue plaque on Edith Morley's home in Kendrick Road, together with funding for community projects and other events were being planned.

Mark Stevens presented a recent update on the Wessex Film and Sound Archive. This was the regional repository that, for many years, had been funded by Hampshire County Council. Hampshire was no longer able to fund it, and proposed a revised partnership, which would cost Berkshire between £37K and £55K annually to join. The alternative option was to store in-house the material that the Archives had previously transferred to Wessex. The latter option was preferred by Archives Board.

Felicity Harrison asked if the extent of the transferred material was known and whether it could all be accessed. Mark Stevens said that a list from Hampshire was awaited. The Archives had digital copies of some material and Hampshire could create digital copies of the rest for a fee. Subject to rights clearance, the material would be made available on the Archives' digital repository. Following discussion, it was also suggested that potential help might be available through Shinfield Studios.

Catherine Sampson asked about research collections and the forthcoming move of Reading Central Library. Donna Pentelow confirmed that Reading had capacity to store the existing collections, and that it was possible that might include material being transferred to the Archives or stored on other council premises. David Cliffe requested that the location of material be made clear within the library catalogue.

8 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be at 2pm on Friday 22 November 2024. Ancestry may still be onsite at the Archives and the meeting location would be finalised nearer the time.