Minutes of the Standing Conference on Archives held at the Royal Berkshire Archives on Friday 22 November 2024 at 2pm

Present: David Cliffe (Berkshire Local History Association), Cllr Stephen Conway (Wokingham Borough Council, Chairman), Cllr Nigel Foot (West Berkshire Council), Cllr Guy Gillbe (Bracknell Forest Council), Felicity Harrison (West Berkshire Council), Angela Huisman (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Jacquie Kavanagh (Diocese of Oxford), Emily Owles (West Berkshire Council), Hannah Pomeroy (Royal Berkshire Archives, minutes), Cllr Neel Rana (Slough Borough Council), Catherine Sampson (Berkshire Family History Society), Mark Stevens (Royal Berkshire Archives), Dr Jacqui Turner (University of Reading)

Apologies: Joan Dils (Berkshire Record Society), Cllr Jack Douglas (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), Donna Pentelow (Reading Borough Council), Cllr Liz Terry (Reading Borough Council), Ivone Turnbull (Royal Berkshire Archives)

The Chairman recorded the thanks of Standing Conference to Cllr John Story (Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead), who had resigned from membership. Mark Stevens would write to Cllr Story to thank him for his service and his support.

1 Minutes of the meeting held 21 June 2024

The minutes were agreed and signed.

2 Capital works update

Mark Stevens introduced Emily Owles, West Berkshire project officer, who was in-house manager for the extension project. Emily provided the following update:

- Mike Thurlow had been hired as external project manager, quantity surveyor and employer's agent. Mike would deliver the project on behalf of West Berkshire and provide indemnity for it. It was noted that Mike had been project manager during the design work for planning approval.
- Proair, a local company, has been engaged as mechanical and electrical engineer.
- West Berkshire will shortly tender for a BREEAM consultant to ensure the building meets its planning obligations.
- In December, approval will be sought from West Berkshire's procurement board to tender for a main contractor on a design and build basis. It was proposed to follow a two-stage tender process and appoint by 14 April 2025.

- The current project timetable would see work begin on 28 July 2025. It was noted that this was only a fortnight before the planning approval expires, and agreement would be sought from Reading Borough Council planners as to what would constitute a meaningful start on the project.
- Construction was timetabled to complete by July 2026, with occupation of the extension to follow 12 months later, once degassing and drying out was complete.

The Chairman asked what impacts would be felt by the Archives during construction. Mark Stevens replied that the main impact would be on car parking. It was conceivable that the contractors would take over the entire public car park and that all site visitors would instead be directed to the staff car park. Impact on the collections was anticipated to be minor and limited to the period just before and during breakthrough between the old and new build. He was optimistic that visitors would not be affected.

The Chairman asked if noise would also be an impact. Emily Owles noted that the noisiest part of the build would be piling, and that realistically this would be done during opening hours. She would note concerns about noise and make the main contractor aware.

The Chairman noted that the timetable was extremely tight to begin meaningful work, and asked if there were any opportunities to compress procurement. Emily Owles responded that both the project board and the procurement board could be convened virtually and at short notice.

Cllr Nigel Foot asked whether solar panels were being considered to assist BREEAM compliance. Emily Owles confirmed that they were, though with due regard to ensuring the roof fabric of the repositories was not compromised. Solar panels above the office workspaces presented fewer issues while there were also opportunities to make other BREEAM improvements to the existing building.

Angela Huisman asked how long the contractors be will onsite. Emily Owles replied that the expected duration of construction was 49 weeks.

Felicity Harrison asked what the BREEAM role covered. Emily Owles clarified that the BREEAM consultant would work to make sure the contractors delivered to the correct sustainability standards. Felicity Harrison also asked, on behalf of Donna Pentelow, when there would be certainty about the final project cost. Emily Owles said that there would be a much higher level of certainty once the initial tenders for the main contract had been received. The project budget included a contingency amount and the preferred procurement process would deliver lower professional fees than anticipated. It was noted that Archives Board would receive budget reports throughout the project. West Berkshire had billed the other five councils for 7.5% of

their contributions and the remaining bills would be sent in 2025/26 and 2026/27. Bill queries could be sent to Felicity Harrison.

Jacquie Kavanagh asked whether an archaeological survey had been undertaken. Mark Stevens replied that Berkshire Archaeology would have been consulted during planning approval and that no survey had been requested. Emily Owles stated that she did not believe an archaeological survey was required and that nothing had been found when the office was built in 1999-2000.

Emily Owles would create a project milestones list to share with Standing Conference. The Chairman thanked Emily for her attendance and Emily then left the meeting.

3 Half-year report

Mark Stevens highlighted the following aspects of the report:

- New acquisitions, including a donation of Loyd family papers and a purchase of Barrington family papers. Some of this material had national significance.
- The purchase of an 18th century recipe book, probably owned by Eleanor Hunter of Beech Hill. Half of the funding came from the Friends of the Nations' Libraries and the other half from the documents purchase fund. The book was a superb example of its type and an excellent resource for studying 18th century home-making.
- A further small reduction in the collections cataloguing backlog.
- A kind donation from John Cox, a researcher, to clean Victorian railway plans. John's name will be included on the relevant catalogue entries to note his contribution to their preservation.
- The launch in April 2024 of an online digital repository, enabling remote access to archives that exist in digital form.
- Digitisation of around 3000 Church of England registers of baptisms, marriages and burials dating back to 1538. This was under the new contract with Ancestry, who would finish onsite in February 2025. Publication of the registers online was expected later next year.
- Engagement events for the Bracknell New Town 75th anniversary and the creative work commissioned to tell the story of George Freeman, the African boy in Georgian Remenham. A portable version of the George Freeman exhibition was available for loan. Mark Stevens would pass details to the Chairman.

Cllr Guy Gillbe asked for details of the largest collections within the cataloguing backlog. Mark Stevens replied that the largest, in terms of volume, were local authority collections for current and predecessor councils. The largest private collections tended to be solicitors' orphaned client papers. Both were typically too

vast for application to external funds, and both the Thames Conservancy and Bracknell Development Corporation archives were good examples of medium sized collections that had been successfully grant-funded. The Archives would next seek external funds to catalogue its collections relating to the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp.

Jacquie Kavanagh asked if there was scope for an exhibition around food and cookery. Mark Stevens confirmed that he was very happy to consider the idea and also the possibility of a historical cookbook, using and updating archival recipes. Catherine Sampson agreed that there might be a market for a cookbook and asked if the Hunter book was available to view. Mark Stevens confirmed that it was currently being catalogued and would be available shortly.

4 Wessex Film and Sound Archive

Mark Stevens provided a fuller report of the item raised at the last meeting. Since then, both Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire had also confirmed that they would not sign up to the proposed new partnership. It seemed likely that the entire collection would fragment.

Hampshire has delayed its decision to end the current partnership, and this was now expected to be taken early next year. Assuming it was agreed, it was expected that the Royal Berkshire Archives material would be removed first. Other Berkshire depositors would also be contacted by Hampshire and asked to take back their material.

This latter point would impact Berkshire libraries, museums and community groups. Although it was for depositors to take their own collection decisions, Hampshire would encourage them to speak to the Archives and Mark Stevens confirmed a willingness to help any depositor affected. It was possible that Standing Conference members might be contacted by depositors and they were asked to please note this offer of help.

5 Survey of distance users of UK archives 2023

Mark Stevens reported in Ivone Turnbull's absence. The survey had been carried out in November 2023. Satisfaction with the overall service was 97%, while 86% of respondents felt that the Archives offered value for money. These results reflected well on staff and many thanks were due to them.

The Chairman also offered congratulations and thanks to staff on behalf of Standing Conference. Mark Stevens would pass these on.

Cllr Guy Gillbe referred to the 2022 visitor survey and its plans for improvement. Mark Stevens confirmed that most actions had been completed, but that the public wifi update had not delivered the expected improvement. He would ask Reading's IT service if further improvements could be made. Cllr Gillbe also asked about the comparatively lower score for microform facilities that had been received in the 2022 survey. Mark Stevens replied that, from previous investigations, it was the quality of some images that was poor. The relevant collections had generally been purchased from elsewhere, but that the Archives would prefer to persist with their offer and accept some criticism for their standard.

A similar score had been received in 2022 for facilities to charge personal devices. Mark Stevens felt this was harsh as there were many plug sockets available in the searchroom, albeit some were slightly hidden. Staff were alert to the accessibility issue and had been reminded to tell visitors where sockets were.

Cllr Neel Rana asked how the Archives tried to boost online engagement. Mark Stevens replied that there were two principal approaches: providing free content via social media feeds, the website blog, and accompanying e-bulletin; and publishing digital records online, such as via the digital repository and the current contract with Ancestry.

The 2024 visitor survey had just completed and updated results would be available during 2025.

6 The National Archives' strategic vision for archives

The National Archives has been commissioned by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to refresh its vision for the sector. The current document, *Archives Unlocked*, was published in 2017.

The National Archives had launched a consultation on the contents for the new document. Mark Stevens had submitted a response on behalf of the Archives and members of Standing Conference were also invited to respond.

Cllr Guy Gillbe asked if a copy of the Archives's response could be circulated, and Mark Stevens replied that unfortunately this was not possible, as the survey did not allow for download of a copy. He offered his apologies. In future, he would draft responses to Government consultations offline to allow their circulation before upload.

7 Any other business

Cllr Guy Gillbe informed the meeting that Bracknell Town Council had appointed a Bracknell History Working Group to celebrate the history of the town and its landmarks.

Dr Jacqui Turner informed the group that the University of Reading would celebrate its centenary in 2026. A steering committee had been formed. Amongst other activities, it was hoped to secure a blue plaque for Edith Morley. Standing Conference expressed an interest in opportunities for communities across Berkshire to join celebratory events.

The Chairman noted that Wokingham Borough Council had recently formed a strategic partnership with the university. He also noted that the university would support the new Berkshire Prosperity Board.

8 Date of next meeting

Two dates were suggested: either Friday 20 June or Friday 27 June 2025, with a start time of 2pm at the Royal Berkshire Archives. The chosen date would be confirmed after the meeting.