



BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Record Office

Annual Report

For 2020-2021

Berkshire Record Office, a countywide archive service for all
local authorities in the Royal County of Berkshire

T 0118 937 5132 arch@reading.gov.uk
F 0118 937 5131 www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk

Berkshire Record Office, 9 Coley Avenue, Reading RG1 6AF





Perhaps the key image from the pandemic: a virtual staff meeting

Introduction

Well, those were quite a twelve months. There are times when I feel we barely accomplished anything, then other times when I am so pleased at what we achieved despite everything.

Huge, huge thanks are due to the staff for: following the myriad versions of onsite guidance to stay healthy in body; for somehow remaining healthy in mind; for their patience as they waited to hear what we could and couldn't do, and worked out how we would do what; and for their positive, creative approach to transforming the way they work. I am so grateful to them all.

Our activities reflected the year. We made more social media posts than ever before, we delivered every talk via video, we took on more written enquiries and we saw comparatively few people.

We are fortunate that, though we lost the 'live' experience of real archives, so much of our business can be conducted remotely. We shared the national disruption of the first lockdown, but since then have been able to carry on a close approximation to the 'old normal'. However, the year has been very disjointed: seeing limited public and colleagues, sometimes having access to the collections and sometimes not.

We are keen to try and maintain the greater remote engagement we have delivered. We would also like to maximise flexibility with who can do what, where and when.

We are also determined to keep offering the experience of 'live' archives. The virtual world is precisely that. Like sport, theatre or music, archives can be consumed by many from afar in digital form but there is no substitute for the being there. And people continue to crave that, as we discovered each time we reopened.

So, what next? My guess is that the next twelve months will be a transitional year. We will decide what new habits to keep and which old habits to recover. We will come to appreciate our creativity and flexibility in knowing that the virtual world is an 'and', not an 'or'. And we will continue to achieve things.

Mark Stevens
County Archivist
June 2021

Welcoming Visitors and Enquirers

As flagged in the introduction, disruption was the year's key feature. With access to collections prevented, the first lockdown meant we could provide only the most basic enquiry service until return to site on 6 July. Telephone enquiries were zero and numbers have not yet recovered, possibly because public expectation has moved permanently towards online and email contact.

Once we were onsite, delayed demand - some 300 written enquiries arrived over the next fortnight - was followed by a sustained increase on pre-lockdown levels. The result is annual figures for written enquiries over nine months that are roughly a fifth higher than the previous year's twelve.

The written enquirer experience

Thank you for the admirable job you have done providing this service at such a difficult time

I cannot thank you enough for all the help you and your colleagues have provided me and the considerable effort you have all put in

I am surprised and pleased at how quickly you have dealt with my enquiries as many other offices are taking significantly longer to respond

You have been amazing. I cannot thank you enough and also say that your services are quite incredible

Absolutely impressed with the sterling service from @BerksArchives #ThankYou #Recommended #SafeHands

Visitor access was even more affected. Closures during all three national lockdowns permitted only two periods of opening: one from mid-August to the end of October and another, briefer two weeks in early December. Even during those periods we were limited to a maximum of five visitors in the building at any one time. The result was the lowest annual number of visitors to the office since 1951.

Covid-secure procedures were drafted to cover all aspects of safety in the office for staff, public and contractors. Surfaces needed to be cleaned regularly, PPE was used for protection and items quarantined before and after use. Day-to-day tasks were micro-managed as they have been in every workplace. This was a major commitment of staff time.

Many things were put on hold, including the launch of the Archives Card and online payments; the former as part of the attempt to limit close contact and the latter due to the lack of council IT equipment for staff at home. Both actions will carry forward into 2021/22.

Many thanks are due to Ancestry for making freely available online the Berkshire electoral register collection throughout the pandemic. This was a great kindness. Together with our own New Landscapes site, it meant that at least two collections - our enclosure records and the electoral registers - were usable for research throughout the year.

Our customer guarantees stood as follows:

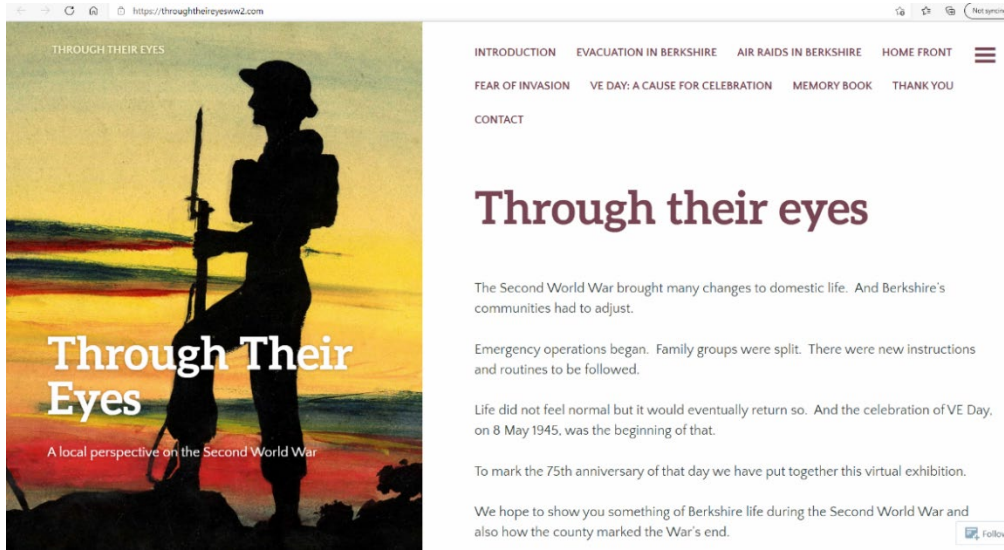
- 90% of visitors got their first choice of visit time (though please note this refers only to the period when we were open)
- 95% of written enquiries were answered within 5 working days
- 92% of all copies were supplied within 10 working days

Figures for production speed are unavailable as all material was produced in advance to allow for quarantine.

Engaging the Curious

With face-to-face engagement prevented throughout the year, online activity formed the entirety of this year's outreach programme.

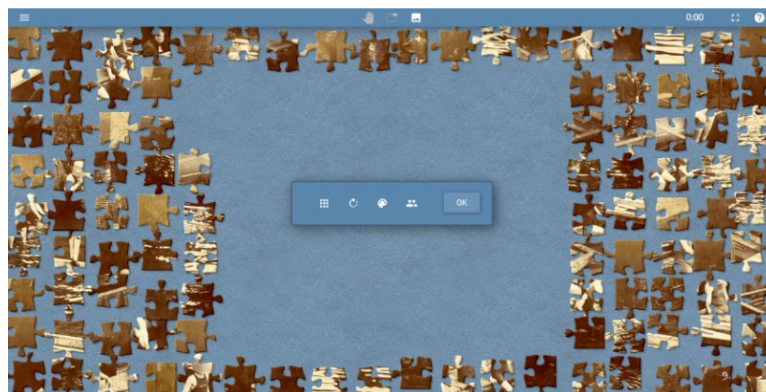
The year began with our first exhibition to have its launch online - www.throughtheireyesww2.com. This was a reworked version of what had been intended for physical display as part of the national VE Day 75 celebrations. It was designed at short notice by two of our archivists, Imogen Burrell and Rosie Everitt, once the first national lockdown was announced and readied for launch within a month. Many thanks are due to Imogen and Rosie, with help from Ivone Turnbull and Laura Luca, for adapting their plans so quickly and smoothly.



Through their eyes VE day website, desktop view

The exhibition records the Home Front experience, using witness testimony from Berkshire people, including the Home Guard, ARP wardens and evacuees. The site has been viewed by over 1,500 people. Its success, at a time when we were all grappling with how to deliver services during the pandemic, was also picked up within the archive profession, and Imogen and Rosie delivered online talks about their achievements via The National Archives and the Archives and Records Association.

We continued with our usual online content. The regular monthly highlights included VE Day as seen by the residents of Oakfield Hostel in Wokingham; the plan of Bagnor Mill, featured in last year's report; Windsor Safari Park; and ex-Mayor of Reading Phoebe Cusden's visit to China in 1955. For those locked down and looking for things to do, we posted some downloadable pictures to colour in and some virtual archive jigsaws to complete.



Rearrange the pieces to show a photograph of the Windsor Swimming Club's blindfold race, c1908, courtesy of the Jigsaw Explorer website

We made a short conservation video in lieu of the Heritage Open Days and posted this on our new YouTube channel. We have also created an Instagram account. The latter has nearly 200 followers while our established Facebook and Twitter following has increased to 1400.

Alongside our own posts, we participated in national social media campaigns. These somewhat ephemeral interactions now account easily for the largest investment we make in creating published content. Social media is a hungry beast and the feeding expectations are increasing all the time. One of the positives of the first lockdown was that we had more time to post and our challenge is to maintain that time as we go back to other duties.

The Berkshire Echo brought more VE Day stories, including features on the returning services' personnel and rebuilding Europe after the War's devastation. Other editions focussed on crafts, protests and the development of nursery school education in the county.

Our talks programme moved entirely online, via Zoom and Teams - two apps that defined the year. We spoke to public audiences via the Berkshire Family History Society, West Berkshire Heritage and Libraries, Wokingham Libraries and for a programme of four talks via Bracknell Libraries. Virtual talks have averaged a higher audience than most organisations had received previously and it seems reasonable to predict that they are here to stay.

Media contacts were also all remote. Radio Berkshire broadcast news pieces about our renewed accreditation award, our experience of reopening to the public after the first lockdown, and mental health records (the latter to support an episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*). I spoke about Broadmoor for two US podcasts: *Transatlantic History Ramblings*, on the east coast, and *House of Mystery* on the west.

With onsite visits banned, we supported higher education as best we could. We provided online talks for the University of Reading history undergraduates and MA students. Happily, the University stayed open during the autumn terms and we were able to 'bubble' two undergraduates for their 'Discovering archives' module; both listed more material in the Greenham Common Peace Camp archive.

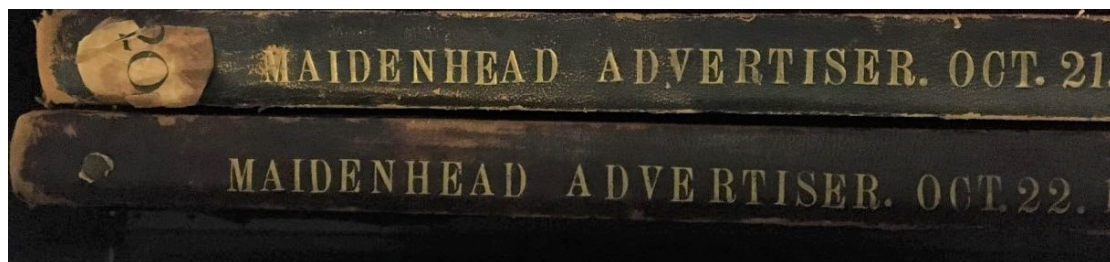


One of the 'Discovering archives' blogposts on the University of Reading site

Developing Collections

We have continued to accept records, though significantly fewer offers have been made this year from smaller organisations and private individuals. This reflects almost certainly the directives to stay at home and minimise social contact.

The quantity of material received is also down but within the figures there are some large collections. Largest by volume is the Baylis Trust's archive set of the *Maidenhead Advertiser*, dating from 1889. This was rescued from an eBay auction and deposited here instead. Many thanks are due to the local volunteers, and Windsor and Maidenhead's museum and arts team, who worked so hard to keep the collection intact.



Two of the many Maidenhead Advertiser volumes

Largest by number of items was the collection received from the Ravenswood Foundation in Crowthorne. Ravenswood began in 1953 as a residential school under the management of what was known as the 'Jewish Association of Parents of Backward Children'. It provided the first part of what would become Ravenswood Village, a community for around one hundred people. The Foundation is now part of Norwood, a national charity that began in the late 18th century in the East End of London. Today, Norwood provides support across several sites to children and adults with learning needs.

Although much of the archive contains sensitive information it is a very complete record of the charity's activities from the 1950s to the present day, spanning its range of educational activities, supported living and other services. It is an important collection for the history of intellectual disabilities as well as for the Jewish community in the UK.



Ravenswood living quarters during the 1950s

Also of wider interest are the earliest archives held by the Thames Valley Police. These relate to its predecessor bodies: the Berkshire Constabulary, and police forces for Reading and Windsor Boroughs. The items span from 1856-1920; there are managerial and operational items, including staff records and registers of

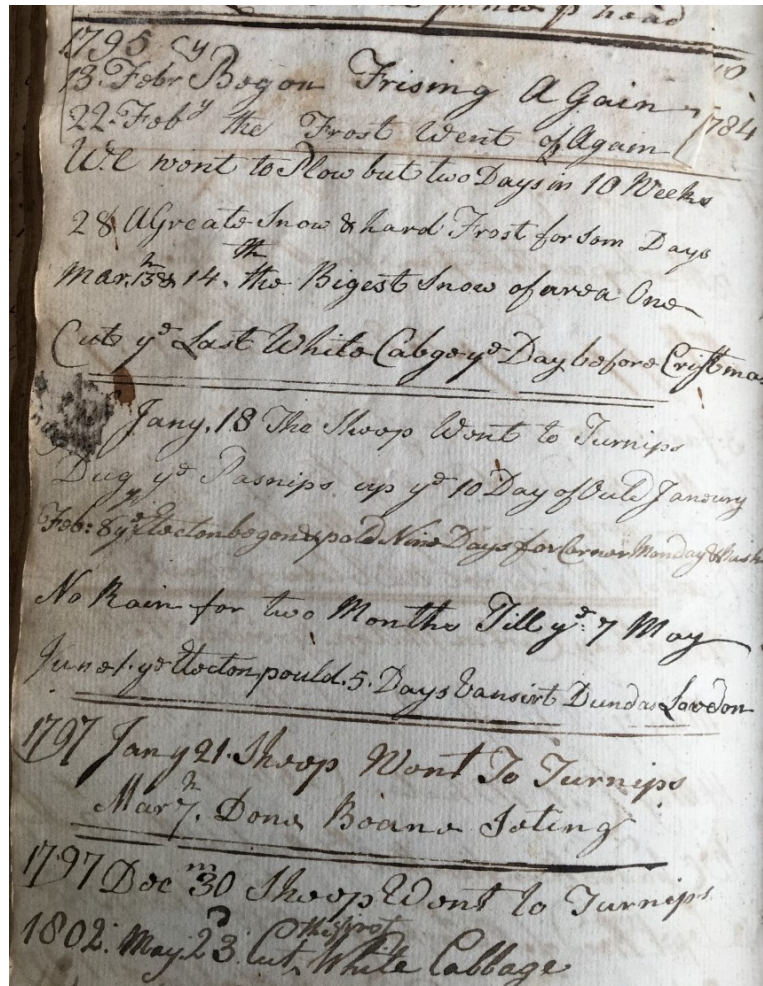
arrests. We hope to develop the relationship with TVP and receive more material in due course.

Day, Hour, & Date brought to Station.	Persons Charged: Name and Address.	Age.	CHARGE.	Persons Charged: Name, Address, and District.
Tuesday. 1.55 Am. 29th Jan. 1889.	Reuben Gable? 6. Lots Road? Chelsea. London?	16.	Detained in Windsor, & sep- posed to have absconded from home.	P.C. Beahan.
Saturday. 7.40 p.m. 2nd February. 1889.	Catherine Stuart. No home. Drump	60.	Begging and wilfully breaking a pane of glass, value 1/-, the property of complainant.	Simon Hestwell Sheet Street. Windsor. Subaltern
Saturday. 8.10 p.m. 2nd February. 1889.	Rose Wood. No home. Single woman.	36	Drunk and disorderly in Pearce Street. Windsor.	P.C. May 4.
Sunday. 9.45 p.m. 3rd February. 1889.	Charles Edward Papsell. Orchard Street. Manchester. Sailor. Holds his head on one side.	29.	Drunk in Sun Passage. Windsor.	P.C. James 12.

The Windsor Borough Police's register of charges, 1889

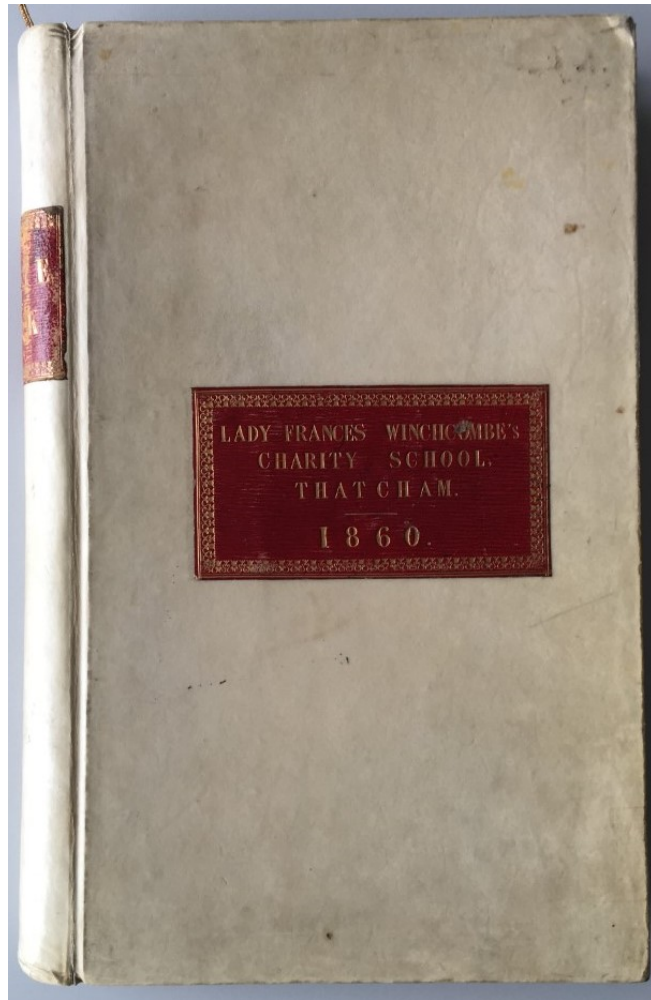
Estate and property records arrived for Hungerford, Reading and Shaw cum Donnington; we also acquired rent particulars for the manors of Aston Tirrold and East Hendred, 1554; a survey of Radley manor, 1563; and a map of the Thatcham Farm estate in 1837. A quantity of material came from descendants of the Wise family, including the diaries of Henry Wise while he was at Wokefield Farm in the early 20th century.

Other work was reflected in accounts from Bell's Asbestos in Slough; a funeral director's early 19th century 'client' register and a Victorian ironmonger's diary from Wallingford; and farm accounts, 1758-1844, from John Hallam of Harwell. Play was represented by a collection from Maidenhead Rowing Club; additional records from Progress Theatre, Reading; the Berkshire Archaeology Research Group; and programmes for operas performed at Bearwood in the 1990s.



Notable farming events noted in John Hallam's journal, 1795-1802

We received the archive of Lady Frances Winchcombe's Thatcham Foundation, a local educational charity, dating back to its formation in 1860. The Compton Pilgrims' Benefit Society deposited its records. School material came in from Wilton House, Reading; The Highlands School, Tilehurst; and Curridge Primary School. Garth Hill College, Bracknell also sent us the Covid-19 material it had created to communicate to students and guardians about the pandemic.



The first minute book for Lady Frances Winchcombe's charity

The Garth Hill material was one of an increasing number of deposits in electronic form. The Emmer Green Residents Association sent us their digital photograph collection, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead began transferring its meeting minutes and agendas, the High Sheriff presented the video of this year's Judicial Service - a socially-distanced affair - and Reading Borough Council passed us the digital tributes received after the tragic killings in the Forbury Gardens. Some 75GB of material was 'ingested' onto Preservica, our digital preservation system, which was an increase of seven hundredfold over the previous year.

Making the Collections Available

Cataloguing work was hampered by the closure of site during the first lockdown, but since then the staff have adapted well to split descriptive work between editing, which can largely be done without recourse to collections, and the tasks for which onsite attendance remains essential. Output is down but not significantly. Plenty of useful retro-conversion has also been completed at home, with staff time typing up older catalogues ready for input into our cataloguing software.

Newspapers feature here too, with cataloguing completed for the production copies received via Trinity Mirror. These differ slightly from the versions held elsewhere in that they are usually marked up with the fees received for each advertisement - the key source of revenue that, for decades, enabled local media to flourish. Titles include the *Berkshire Chronicle*, *Reading Observer* and *Reading Standard* as well as the more modern *Wokingham*, *Bracknell and Ascot Times* and *Reading Post*. There is also one volume of the short-lived *Maidenhead Argus*, published from 1900-1903. Unfortunately, many of the volumes are in very poor condition; though their local preservation is important, we shall refer researchers to the British Newspapers Online website in lieu of the hard copies wherever possible.



Some of the many Reading Posts

We have listed the large volume of material received in recent years for the Basildon and Yattendon estates of the Iliffe family. Originally from Warwickshire, Edward, 1st Baron Iliffe, settled at Yattendon Court in 1925. He was proprietor of local newspapers in Birmingham, Cambridge and Coventry, part owner of the *Daily Telegraph* and MP for Tamworth from 1923-1929.

The Yattendon estate grew to include Childs Court as well as Frilsham House; Buckhold Hill Farm, Bradfield; Bower Farm, Aldworth; and property in Bucklebury. The estate was run principally for agriculture and timber though more recently has provided business accommodation. The family archives are mostly deeds of the properties purchased to build the estate. These span from the 16th to the 19th centuries. There is also a court roll for the manor of Hampstead Ferrers (Norreys), which covers 1369-1374 and has probably remained with the collection by chance after a period of shared ownership with Yattendon.

Basildon Park was bought by Edward Iliffe in the early 1920s but sold by the family later that decade. It was his son, Langton, who purchased the house and grounds once more in 1952 and later donated it to the National Trust. Basildon is one of those estates that changed hands many times and the result is that its archives are split. The Iliffe collection fills many gaps. It includes some wonderful finds, such as a dozen manorial court rolls spanning 1552-1665 and a plan of Blandy's Farm, Basildon, from 1769. There are also many deeds and family papers, previously thought lost, from earlier owners of the current house and its predecessor, Basildon Court. These include an impressive survival of leases and other tenancy documents for properties rented out. The total is a substantial resource not only for the history of the estate but also the parish and its people.



Plan of Blandy's Farm, Basildon, 1769 [the farm was added to the Basildon Park estate by the Morrison family in 1872]

Then there are the professional and community papers from Will Smallcombe, who was head of Reading Museum between 1926-1958. Smallcombe was active in his own sphere of zoology as well as more widely in local history. He established the schools loan scheme that is still operated by the museum today. After his retirement, he was honorary curator at the Calleva Museum in Silchester and involved in the Berkshire Retirement Association and the Rotary Club. His papers reflect these and other interests across a long life.



The chief officers of the Borough of Reading, photographed by Will Smallcombe at Streatley, 7 July 1948

Another Berkshire person with huge expertise was the ceramicist, Alan Caiger-Smith, who founded the Aldermaston Pottery in 1955. Alan is an important figure within British ceramics for his work on lusterware and tin-glazed earthenware, and the Pottery was a place of learning and experimentation. Though it closed in 2006 we are delighted that Alan passed us his archive. It includes a complete run of sales ledgers and many detailed records of firings in his kilns, alongside exhibition catalogues, photographs and other ephemera. Alan sadly passed away last year but his influence will live on.



Alan Caiger-Smith at the wheel, with assistants Graham Adamson and David Tipler: the Aldermaston Pottery, 1971

Smaller collections of note include some late Georgian account books for Sarah Wilson and Samuel Roe of Maidenhead, respectively a tailor and carrier, and for James Siddall, a veterinary surgeon from Windsor; coroners' case papers from Maidenhead and Reading; records from Edgbarrow School, Crowthorne; and the papers of Reeves of Wantage and Abingdon, fried fish dealers (or chip shop owners, if you prefer).

Spreading the Impact of the Collections

There were a handful of new publications that made use of our material. A history of Kennington Primary School, two oral histories about Coley in Reading, and a biography of Sir Arthur Russell of Swallowfield Park. An online article for the Institutional History Society featured Abingdon Gaol, and St Andrew's Convalescent Hospital, Clewer, was part of an article in the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*.

Word of mouth appears to be spreading our list of Black and Asian people whose baptisms and burials are recorded in Berkshire parish registers. Both Chiltern Edge and the Willink School, Burghfield sought permission to use the list in their classrooms. Similarly, various Swing Riot documents have now made their way into the annual memorial at Kintbury churchyard for William Winterbourne, hanged at Reading Gaol in 1831 for his part in the destruction of agricultural machinery.

Caring for Collections

Conservation staff began the year helping type up catalogues as well as older treatment records. To a certain extent this continued to be the year's pattern, with practical work only possible for staff when they were onsite. The restricted time is reflected in the output figures.

Jobs needed to be capable of leaving safely until the next visit. One of the items repaired was the 1558 grant of Smewyns manor, in White Waltham, that we acquired late last year with help from the Friends of the National Libraries and the V&A Purchase Fund.

This document had spent some forty years hung in a frame. It had been mounted to a very acidic board by a method known as drumming, where the entire rear of it was pasted and adhered to the board to achieve a flat appearance. Unfortunately, the board was damaging the parchment of the grant.



The acidic mounting board

The mount was tapered by gently scraping its entirety with a scalpel. Once the facing layer only remained, this was removed with small applications of water to reactivate the paste. The grant was then humidified to relax it and tension dried with magnets. It is now safe for at least another 450 years.



Scraping off the board



The grant after treatment and cleaning, ready to be boxed

Special Projects

Accreditation

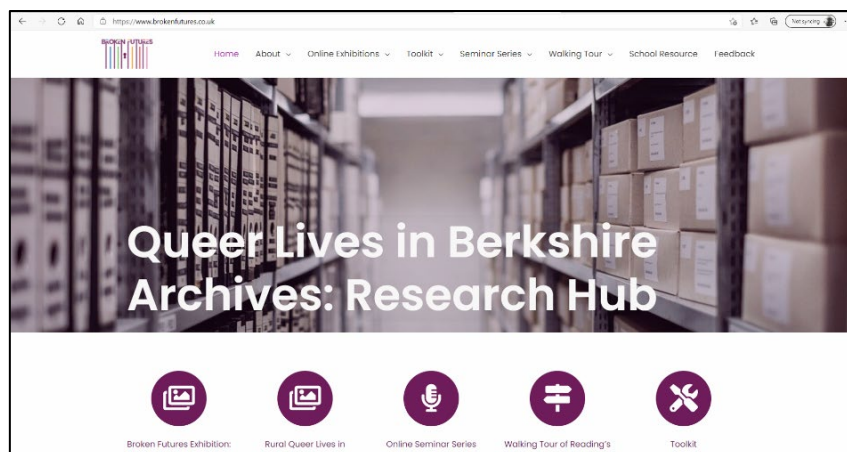
We were delighted to hear in July that our award of archive service accreditation had been renewed by The National Archives. This confirms our appointment as a place of deposit under the Public Records Acts and Manorial and Tithe Rules, fulfilling our contractual obligations to the six Berkshire districts. It also places us in a select band of UK archives to become accredited. The awarding panel ‘commended the service’s sustained effective work’.

Re-application is next due in 2023 and we will need then to prepare a full submission, updating the panel on all aspects of our work as well as our progress against improvement actions. The latter task us to continue with current activities: building digital preservation, regional archive partnerships and local engagement partnerships; to redevelop public access as we recover from the pandemic; and to use the collections to engage diverse audiences.

Broken Futures

Research continued for this project despite lockdown, but sadly without the volunteers being able to spend much time in the Record Office. Instead, work moved online to source biographical information for those individuals who had already been identified via the prison and court records.

By the end of the year the project was ready to launch. We contributed a podcast to its online series and various images for the project website, www.brokenfutures.co.uk. The project also created a walking tour guide to Reading’s queer past and a toolkit for archival research, based on the volunteers’ work here. It has been a pleasure to work again with Amy and Jess, the project officers, and we wish them and the volunteers well for the future.



The Broken Futures homepage

Victorian schools

The project has been on hold due to the pandemic and our onsite restrictions. We will resume work once restrictions are lifted.

Liquid Assets - the Thames Conservancy archive

Sadly, the first lockdown meant that we lost a quarter of the time allocated for this project. The funders were unable to grant an extension and, although our project archivist, Michaela Garland, was able to research at home, it was not how we expected to fill her time.

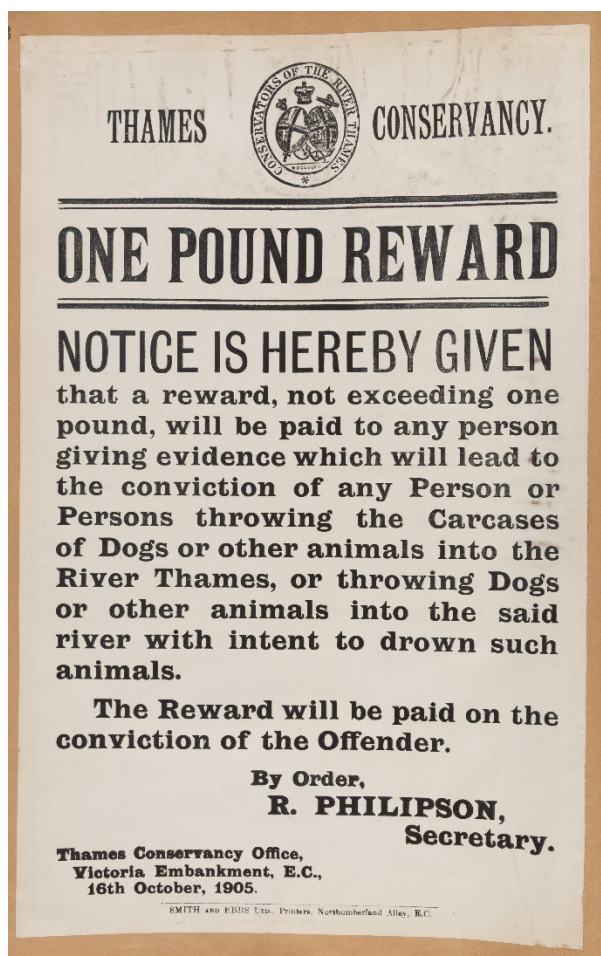
Once we were back onsite, Michaela reshaped the project so that she spent her time on descriptive work only and left ancillary tasks to the permanent staff. By the time her contract was complete, in February, Michaela had created catalogue entries for all the items. It was an impressive achievement. What was left were many rolls of plans which required packaging and numbering, and work to complete these was ongoing at the year's end.

There are over 700 volumes, rolls and bundles in the archive, which spans the whole of the non-tidal river from its source until Teddington Lock. The archive covers in detail the Conservancy's engineering works, inspection duties and other responsibilities to the Thames. It is a truly wonderful resource and we offer our thanks again to The National Archives and the Pilgrim Trust for providing funding through Archives Revealed to catalogue it.



One item from the vast Thames Conservancy archive: part of James Brindley's plan for the Corporation of London proposing a canal from Boulter's Lock to Mortlake, including a cut from 'Slow' to Windsor, 1771

Work at year-end was also in hand to produce an online exhibition based on the Conservancy archive. The 250th anniversary of the first meeting of the Thames Navigation Commission, the Conservancy's predecessor, falls on 9 May 2021. With restricted onsite access certain to remain until at least 21 June, we decided that rather than miss the anniversary we would make its celebration virtual. The Environment Agency, Thames Water and Thames Path are all supporting the exhibition and Thames Water have provided funds to create it.



Reward notice to prevent animals being thrown into the Thames, 1905

With Thanks to Our Staff

The staff have coped wonderfully with all the restrictions and changes forced on them over the year. They have created a safe workplace and a safe research environment for the public. They have kept healthy and infection-free and, though the year has undoubtedly provided challenges in terms of mental wellbeing, they

have succeeded in all they have needed to do. We will continue to pay extra attention to them as we move through the pandemic.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were no staff changes during the year apart from having to say goodbye to Michaela, our Thames Conservancy archivist, at the end of her contract. There were also no changes to the external positions held. I was re-appointed as visiting research fellow in the University of Reading's History Department and as Vice-President of the Berkshire Family History Society, while I continued to sit on the Wellcome Trust's Research Resources Committee. Ellie Thorne sat on the council of the Berkshire Record Society and Lisa Spurrier on the editorial committee of the journal *Berkshire Old and New*. Sue Hourigan remained an assessor for the Archives and Records Association's conservation certificate.

And with Thanks to Our Volunteers

Like us, our volunteers mostly moved online for the year. We are grateful to them too for their flexibility and enthusiasm to return in person once it is safe.

In lieu of onsite work, around ten of them have been creating a spreadsheet of soldiers mentioned in the Pangbourne Methodist Café's Second World War visitor books and registers. In the brief spells that we were open to the public we were also able to see personally Peter Durrant and Deborah Jenkins, both of whom continued cataloguing work. One of Deborah's items is an eye-witness account of a previous pandemic, when yellow fever reached Gibraltar in 1804.

It was lovely also to be able to host two University of Reading undergraduates, Amy Longmuir and James Watts, during the autumn term as planned for their 'discovering archives' module. Amy and James produced detailed contents of two more boxes of Greenham Common Peace Camp material, adding to our existing knowledge of what is in the collection.

Key Numbers

Visitors and enquiries

	2020/21	2019/20
Visitors to the search room	303	2242
Written and telephone enquiries	4675	5186
Documents produced	1199	6238
Microforms consulted	0	4615
Copies supplied	2840	9904
Visits to online resources	80676	66182
Talks and visits: number	11	19
Talks and visits: attendance	398	362

Accessioning and cataloguing

Accessions received: number	70	167
Accessions received: volume	3.486m ³	3.851m ³
	76.79GB	5.29GB
Catalogues completed: volume	20.019m ³	8.105m ³
Accessions catalogued: number	58	189
Items catalogued	1917	3946

Conservation and preservation

First aid	6	414
Tipping-in	0	765
Sewing	25	119
Packaging	33	89
Encapsulation	4	318
Cleaning	172	744

Staff resources

Headcount of permanent staff	19	19
Number of full-time equivalent posts	13.40	13.40
Headcount of project staff	1	1