

The Berkshire Echo

The Newsletter of Berkshire Record Office

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A NEW RECORD OFFICE FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

On 3 October 2000 the new Berkshire Record Office opened its doors to the public for the first time. The new building, funded by the six Unitary Authorities of Berkshire, provides the third home for Berkshire's records in the Office's fifty-two year history. When it first opened in 1948, the Record Office occupied rather cramped premises in the basement of the old Shire Hall in the Forbury in Reading. During the next thirty years the Office grew steadily, taking over more and more rooms in the Shire Hall and Assize Court buildings and elsewhere. By 1980 records were stored in four different buildings in Reading. In 1980/81 everything was moved to Berkshire County Council's new headquarters at Shinfield Park, to what at the time seemed palatial accommodation: strongrooms for some three miles of shelving, and a searchroom for sixteen people! By the 1990s this was again too small for the growing business: both records and visitors felt increasingly squeezed. Additional accommodation was found in Shire Hall, to increase the number of reader places by 30% and to add another mile or so of shelving. But this was always seen as a short-term measure. The huge growth of interest in family and local history, and the increasing emphasis on use of primary source material in educational work in schools and universities, together with the Office's success in acquiring important new collections of records, continued to put pressure on space. So the decision to sell Shire Hall following local government reorganisation in Berkshire provided the opportunity to build anew, with the needs of the twenty-first century in mind.



The new Record Office stands in the grounds of the eighteenth-century Yeomanry House (formerly known as Castle Hill House) at the top of Castle Hill not far from the centre of Reading. (The

entrance to the site is actually in Coley Avenue, hence the address is Coley Avenue rather than Castle Hill). The building, in glass and concrete, is in striking contrast to its neighbour, though in spite of its uncompromising modern-ness, it has been designed, with its white walls and its low roof line, to be as neighbourly as possible. A tree-lined court has been constructed between the buildings, and landscaping around both (still to be completed at the front) will soften the impact as the plants and trees grow to maturity.



The new Record Office is in the shape of the letter T. At the southern end, the top stroke of the T provides strong room accommodation for six miles of records – sufficient (on the basis of recent accrual rates) for at least the next fifteen years. These have been built to provide atmospheric conditions to meet the latest British Standard for archival storage, and include a special strongroom for photographs, magnetic tape and disk storage. Also in this block is a document reception suite including document cleaning facilities (not all archives arrive in a clean and tidy state) and a cataloguing room. The north wing (the leg of the T) contains public accommodation on the ground floor and staff accommodation (including a light and spacious conservation area) on the first. Public accommodation comprises a large, well-lit search room with spaces for thirty-two readers, much more elbow-room for all, and better facilities for microform study and reference, as well as increased space for studying manuscripts and maps; a roomy reception area; and a versatile education/lecture/exhibition room.

A small opening ceremony was held on the morning of 3 October, to which representatives of the six Berkshire authorities were invited. The first readers arrived at 1.00 pm, and the search room has been busy ever since. Opening hours for research are the same as before (and in spite of the extra space advance booking is just as necessary), and we are planning a series of events, to include tours and open days, to show the building to anyone who is interested.

Peter Durrant

The New Searchroom

The new searchroom is considerably larger than the old one at Shinfield Park, and we can therefore offer more space to more visitors.

We have increased the number of reservable General Register Office fiche-readers (for births, marriages and deaths) from six to eight, and spread the fiches within smaller drawers in three separate cabinets, rather than two, which should reduce the congestion which was previously such an irritant.

For other family historians, using Berkshire film and fiches, there are now sixteen further machines (up from ten).

All 24 film and fiche readers have more elbow room, so that no separate table needs to be allocated to those using them. There are, however, a dozen desk spaces available for researchers using parish transcripts or library material.

We can additionally accommodate at least twelve people using original documents, and two more for maps, with space still to offer the film and fiche user the chance to consult an occasional unfiled document or a map when the need arises.

Although the number of spaces given above totals 50, we shall need to limit actual numbers to 32 (up from a previous maximum of 20) given current staffing levels.

We have stored films near film readers and fiches by fiche readers, aiming to position fiche drawers at convenient heights. There are power points by each reader and at each manuscript desk for those who wish to bring lap-tops. All parts of the room are accessible to those who have wheelchairs.

Catalogues and indexes are positioned centrally in the room, with writing ledges for taking notes from index cards, and a table and chairs alongside for lengthier perusal of catalogues.

We have revised certain handlists, for example, Berkshire probate records, non-parochial registers, and electoral registers, to

make them clearer and easier to use, and introduced a new handlist of Berkshire hearth tax returns, 1662-1664, newly available here on microfilm.

Colleagues have compiled new street indexes for all Berkshire's towns. Previously we could only offer 1851-1891 for Reading, copied from those at the Public Record Office, but now we have added our own for 1841, and similar street indexes for all census years for Abingdon, Faringdon, Maidenhead, Newbury, Wallingford, Windsor and Wokingham.



Initial reaction from members of the public during our first week is favourable and suggests that they have found the searchroom a lighter, brighter place to work. Certainly two of the four walls are glazed from floor to ceiling, with a large window also in the opposite corner to give added light. By contrast, we can dim the lights over the film and fiche readers.

Facilities in reception include lockers, as before, and also toilets (including disabled), a pay-phone, a pair of armchairs for waiting visitors, and a long table with bar stools by the window where people can take a break or have their packed lunch. We hope soon to install a drinks machine for tea, coffee, chocolate and cold water.

We sincerely hope that you will find reason and opportunity to come and do some research before too long. Please make an appointment : our opening hours remain the same as before. We can send you leaflets, including "How to Reach Us", on request.

Bob Hale

Wedding bells

The proximity of the new Record Office to the Register Office recently resulted in an unusual call for help. A very happy young couple had just arrived to be married. Thinking that only one witness was required, they had invited a close friend to come along. What could they do now? Knock on the door of the, as yet, unopened Record Office and ask, 'Will anyone witness our marriage?'



Although I was wearing jeans I agreed; thankfully everyone was casually dressed. We assembled in the Register Office, and while we waited the bride's friend told me how the couple had met on the Internet two years ago. The bride lived in America and the groom came from Caversham. As their friendship blossomed, they spent six months in each other's country. This was to be the first of two ceremonies, the second one being in Italy where the bride's family originally came from.

The ceremony was simple and brief, but the Registrar created a real sense of occasion. Everyone looked delighted, we duly signed our names and the groom was invited to kiss the bride. Photographs were taken including the Registrar and me!

It was lovely to be part of this simple but joyous occasion, unexpected as it was.

Diana Rowley

Staff Moves

We were sorry to say goodbye to Senior Archivist Elizabeth Hughes when she left the Record Office at the end of September after eight years managing the public service here, in order to take up a well-deserved promotion as County Archivist of East Sussex. One of her responsibilities there will be to facilitate the

building of a new Record Office for East Sussex, so her experience with our move will stand her in good stead.

There are two new faces to report : Behind the scenes, Jacqueline Abel, formerly based at Reading Museum, has been appointed Conservation Assistant, and Ted Ridgewell, who has joined the team of Archives Assistants, will become a familiar face to regular visitors as he will be bringing most requested documents into the searchroom.

Lisa Spurrier

Just Catalogued

There has been little time available for cataloguing during our move, but we are pleased to report the arrival of some school records : governors' minutes for Sonning Church of England Aided Primary School, 1983-1987 (2000/SCH/1); managers' minutes of Windsor Royal Free and Industrial School, 1862-1915 (2000/SCH/2); log books, 1889-1978, and managers' and governors' minutes, 1946-1975, of Princess Margaret Rose School, Windsor, formerly known as Clewer St Stephen Senior Girls School, (2000/SCH/3); the log book of the Handicraft Centre, Victoria Street, Windsor, 1919-1950 (2000/SCH/4/1); and minutes of the Royal Free School Association, Windsor, 1973-1979 (2000/SCH/5/1).

Lisa Spurrier



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