

BERKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

ANNUAL REPORT

1999-2000

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INTRODUCTION

The year 1999/2000 saw a mixture of achievement and disappointment. A great deal of work was carried out to prepare for the expected move to the new Record Office building, planned for the early months of 2000, and it was thus particularly disappointing that the building was not ready for handover on schedule and that the move was significantly delayed. Indeed, at the year's end the Record Office, still in its Shinfield Park accommodation, was closed to the public, and no firm date had been set for a removal.

The work that had been completed, representing a considerable input of staff time, will be of long-term benefit, however. Not only were all items in the strongrooms scheduled, and detailed location lists prepared, but damaged boxes were replaced, fragile items were wrapped and boxed, and references were checked and (where necessary) corrected. In short, a major housekeeping exercise was carried out. And for most of this time this was achieved with minimal disruption to the service.

Indeed, some new initiatives were possible, notable among them being two proposals designed to increase access to the collections under the government's New Opportunities and Heritage Lottery Fund schemes respectively. The former proposal envisaged digitisation of Berkshire enclosure maps and awards and related records, to provide for improved access to images of key documents for economic, social and landscape history in Berkshire. This was supported by colleagues in Reading Museum Service and other local agencies. The latter was a shared initiative by a number of archive services in south-east England, to copy, digitise and place on the internet catalogues of key collections of estate records in the region. A decision on the first submission is expected in June; the latter proposal is still in its early stages. Both however are indicative of a developing commitment on the part of the Office to use new technology to offer access to its wealth of historical records to as wide an audience as possible.

It is a pleasure once again to be able to record the events and achievements of the year in the Annual Report, and to thank those who have made them possible. As usual, therefore, I would like to thank all who contributed to the work of the Record Office during the year: to colleagues in Reading Borough Council and in the other unitary authorities in Berkshire, to members of the Archives Board and the Standing Conference on Archives in Berkshire, to our depositors and volunteers, and, last but not least, to the Record Office staff themselves.

Peter Durrant
June 2000

THE PUBLIC SERVICE

The public service is the public face of the Record Office. Much goes on behind the scenes to support this work, and this will be discussed later in this report. But it is through its search room and enquiry services, its outreach programme, its lectures and exhibitions and its educational work that the Record Office is known to the majority of its users. In spite of the time-consuming preparations for the move and the reduction in services towards the end of the year, the Record Office had another successful year of public service.

Search Room and Enquiry Services

A full public service was maintained for the first ten months of the year. At the end of January access to original manuscripts ceased, but access to microforms, transcripts, printed maps and other printed sources continued. Originally it was planned to end this service at the end of February, but as the start date for the move receded, it was decided to extend the service until 24 March. This restriction probably accounts for the 5% drop in visitor numbers and the 18% fall in documents produced for consultation in the search room. However, enquiries by post (including e-mail) and telephone continued to remain at a high level, and indeed increased slightly over the previous year (by 4% and 2% respectively).

Enquiries came from all over the world, and on subjects as diverse as mental asylum landscapes, the *acta* of Richard I, the recruitment of army doctors during world war I, clockmakers, Parson Woodford, the 'Swing' riots, the letters of Alexis de Toqueville, the sixteenth-century musician Robert Fayrfax, lime kilns, war-time evacuation, and the breeder of the Duke of York potato.

Users of microforms benefited by the acquisition at the beginning of the year of six new microfiche readers, and towards the end by the purchase of a new reader-printer, in all cases to replace equipment that had reached the end of its useful life. Since such a high proportion of the Office's most popular sources is now on film or fiche it is very important in terms of user satisfaction to have equipment which is good and reliable.

User satisfaction continued to be monitored through 'customer comment' forms. Most comments were favourable and indicated a high level of satisfaction with the service. Comments such as *'a really rewarding family search day was possible by the help and guidance afforded by all the people here. Thank you so much'*, and *'everyone could not have been more helpful. Marvellous'* were typical. In the autumn the Record Office participated in a national user survey. The questionnaires will be analysed centrally and a report on national trends and users' views will be published. Participating offices will also be able to request analyses of their own returns: when these are available we shall be able to use them to plan for future developments in the service in a more informed way.

In the last quarter of the year much staff time was devoted to revising and improving information leaflets in preparation for the new building. It is hoped that clearer design

and layout will make these more attractive and accessible to users, particularly to those who are new to or unfamiliar with the service.

Outreach

The amount of outreach achieved during the year fell substantially in comparison with the previous year. This was the result of a deliberate decision to restrict the number of talks and visits scheduled in the run-up to the move. However, staff did speak to a number of local groups, and took stands to two major local events, the Berkshire Family History Society open day in May (attended by some 350 people) and the very successful Bracknell Family History Fair in January (attended by 1600 people). News of Record Office activities continued to be disseminated via the *Berkshire Echo*, four issues of which were published during the year.

Because of the Office's restricted circumstances, no exhibition was mounted during the year. However, assistance was given with exhibitions outside the Office at Aldworth (for a study day on the Aldworth giants), Compton, Cumnor, Frilsham, Peasemore and Ruscombe, and at the Minster Church of St Mary, Reading, at a special event to raise funds for major repairs.

Limited media publicity was achieved during the year, the most notable being a short feature on *Meridian Tonight* in December using Record Office documents to explore aspects of Christmas in the twentieth century.

Lectures and Educational Work

As was the case with outreach, educational work was restricted this year because of preparations for the move, but a number of groups benefited from the Office's activities. At one end of the spectrum was a visit by members of staff to Crowthorne Church of England School, where 190 pupils aged between five and eleven were introduced to the school's old punishment book and how it is looked after. In contrast to this was the Office's contribution to adult education in the area. Peter Durrant led a day school on parish records, and Elizabeth Hughes lectured at a similar event on 'The Real Millennium' organised jointly by Reading University Department for Continuing Education and the Berkshire Local History Association.

Links with Reading University continued. Peter Durrant spoke to second year History Department students about using local sources for final year BA dissertations, and to Music Department MA students on sources for organ history, and Elizabeth Hughes led a session in the Record Office on medieval records for undergraduate students.

Contributions to professional training and development were made by members of the Conservation Unit. Bindery staff led a session on Florentine and manual pulp repair for twenty members of the Society of Bookbinders, and Sue Hourigan spoke on mounting exhibitions at a regional meeting of the Society of Archivists at Gloucestershire Record Office.

ACCESSIONING, CATALOGUING, RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

Accessions

Accessions during the year spanned a period of over six hundred years, and as usual came from all Berkshire and beyond. The document that travelled furthest to find its resting place in our strong rooms was an eighteenth-century deed of land in Welford, discovered in Florida, USA, and kindly presented by its owner. The earliest document was a deed of land in Winkfield dated 1398, whilst among the more recent documents was an illustrated sale catalogue for Folly Farm, Sulhampstead, dated 1999. Indeed, nearly 40% of all accessions during the year contained material dating from 1990 or later, reflecting the role of the Record Office in collecting appropriate contemporary material for historians of the future.

Notable among the accessions were the large numbers of parish records, many of them dating back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Amongst them were items from Great Coxwell dating from 1703, from South Moreton dating from 1788, from North Moreton dating from 1813, from Kennington and Speenhamland dating from 1829, from Letcombe Regis dating from 1837, and from Reading St Bartholomew dating from 1875. The Great Coxwell records included a volume of churchwardens' accounts, 1703-1771, charity accounts, 1783-1865, vestry and PCC minutes, 1863-1976, and school accounts, 1885-1903. The South Moreton records included two volumes of overseers' accounts and rates, 1790-1808, long thought lost, containing detailed accounts of expenditure on poor relief in this downland parish during a period of particular hardship for rural communities generally, as a succession of bad harvests in the mid-1790s led to a scarcity of wheat and high prices for food of all kinds. Altogether, 36 accessions were received from 30 different parishes.

Nonconformist records received, adding to the Office's extensive collection, included records of the recently-closed Theale Congregational Church, 1844-1995, and of Whitley Hall Methodist Church, Reading, 1915-1997.

School records were fewer in number than in recent years, but included an important group of records of Newbury British Girls' School, 1835-1909, and Newbury Council Girls' School, 1909-1995, received through the good offices of West Berkshire Heritage Service. The records of the former are of particular interest since they include a rare example of a log book predating the regulations of 1862 which made the keeping of such records compulsory.

Charity records included additional material from Reading Municipal Charities, with records dating from 1599 added to an already large accumulation from this source. Cataloguing of these records is in progress, but the end never seems quite to be in sight as new material constantly arrives! Other charity records received included the will of John Southbie of Carswell, acquired by purchase from an auctioneer in Swindon. This is of importance as by it Southbie established the charity which bears his name. Other records of this charity were already on deposit in the Record Office. The trustees of the Robert Palmer Almshouse Charity, Sonning, deposited the charity's minute book, 1915-1957.

Among the private records deposited was a series of letter books from a Maidenhead corn merchant (deposited via the Maidenhead Heritage Centre); account books of Butler wine and spirit merchants, Reading; records of Reading Prison, 1878-1966 (including the execution book containing the entry for Charles Thomas Wooldridge, whose execution forms the central theme of Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*); deeds and papers relating to Marchfield House, Wokingham; and the final instalment of the Archer-Houblon papers from Welford Park.

Cataloguing

The output figures for catalogues completed during the year was exceptionally large in 1999/2000, achieved largely by the completion of the catalogue of Reading Borough Quarter Sessions records, representing the culmination of work carried out over a number of years. Reading was one of seven Berkshire boroughs to have its own Quarter Sessions, and its records are the last to have been catalogued. The early records (pre-1835) are unfortunately largely missing, but the later ones make up for this, at least in quantity. Catalogued papers include a sessions diary, 1682-1691; sessions minutes, 1836-1969; depositions and convictions at Petty Sessions, 1839-1908; coroners' inquisitions, 1839-1912; and calendars of prisoners, 1836-1939.

Whilst this was the largest collection to be completed, numerous other catalogues were also prepared. Most notable amongst these was the catalogue of the records of the Hunter family of Beech Hill, 1329-1958. Part of this collection had been catalogued in the early 1950s, but substantial additional material had been received, and the opportunity was taken to revise the original catalogue whilst dealing with the later accessions. The Hunters were London merchants before settling in Berkshire, and the collection includes some journals of their Levant trade as well as extensive records of their Berkshire estates.

Other catalogues completed have included business and personal records of the Butler family of Reading, wine and spirit merchants, 1873-1999; records of Darvill Last and Goodford (later Stuchbery Stone), solicitors of Windsor, 1638-1959 (mainly deeds and legal papers, but including several wills, and records of the trustees of Windsor Independent Chapel, 1832-1930); Berkshire papers from the offices of Kinnears of Swindon, solicitors, 1671-1973; estate management records of the Ewen family of Sonning, 1840-1935; and parish records from numerous parishes.

Research and Publication

As in previous years, the most popular subject was family history, but research activity was by no means limited to this, and the diversity of subjects studied shows no sign of abating. Local and regional studies remain the most numerous, whilst on a number of occasions local evidence was sought as part of a national project. The motive for research is varied. Some is carried out for personal interest, some as part of a community project, and some for educational or academic purposes. In addition, the Record Office fulfils its role as a place for the deposit of documents of record by providing facilities for research carried out for legal or administrative purposes.

Among the subjects studied during the year were the records of enclosure, dissent and nonconformity in eighteenth-century Berkshire, recusancy in the Thames valley, slavery in the West Indies, quaker history, workhouse children, and the work of the Thames Navigation Commission. Numerous millennium histories were researched during the year which drew heavily on the resources of the Office.

During the year volume four in the Berkshire Record Series, *Berkshire Probate Accounts, 1583-1712*, was published. Edited by Ian Mortimer, this draws on the important collection of Berkshire Archdeaconry probate records in the Record Office. One hundred and sixty-six documents have been included, drawn from all parts of the county and representing a variety of individuals and occupations. The value of probate accounts in historical research has only recently been recognised, and this volume is the first to be devoted entirely to such records. It is thus an important contribution to opening up the records and making them available for research.

Record Office staff themselves contributed articles to various publications. Mark Stevens' article 'Local Authority Archives: Places and Perceptions' was published in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*. Roberta Ciocci published an article on Florentine and manual pulp repair to *The Quarto*, the newsletter of the London and South East Region of the Society of Bookbinders. Elizabeth Hughes contributed an article on Reading Prison records to the *Berkshire Family Historian*, and Lisa Spurrier on bastardy records to the same journal. In addition, four members of staff are currently editing material for eventual publication by the Berkshire Record Society: the County Archivist (parish overseers' papers from Hungerford and Newbury), Sabina Sutherland (the visitation notebook of Archdeacon James Randall), Lisa Spurrier (licences for nonconformist places of worship), and Elizabeth Hughes (minutes of the visiting justices at Reading Gaol).

RECORD OFFICE LIBRARY

A total of 428 new items were accessioned into the library, consisting as usual of gifts, purchases and publications received by subscription. Among local histories kindly donated by authors or study groups were works on Beenham, Brimpton, Hungerford, Katesgrove (Reading), Kintbury and Stanford in the Vale; other, more specific, research treated, for example, the Poor Lands Charity in Tilehurst, farms in Sandhurst and Cookham Methodism. A major PhD thesis entitled 'The Town of Reading c.1200-c.1542' was also gratefully received.

We continued to buy reference works new and old to assist local and family historians visiting the Office, including this year, for example, *Crockford's Clerical Directory 1905*, the *Illustrations Index to 'The Builder' 1843-1883*, and *Ancestral Trails, a complete guide to British genealogy and family history*. Books relating to Berkshire included *Soldiers Died in the Great War, part 52: the Royal Berkshire Regiment*, and *A Millennium in the Royal Borough [of Windsor and Maidenhead]*. Other topics ranged from the English fair, through civic heraldry, to wartime evacuation and genealogy on the internet. Through subscription and purchase we continued also to promote the professional development of staff through the publications of bodies like the Society of Archivists, the Records Management Society, and the National Preservation Office, on subjects such as government policy on archives and digital imaging.

Perhaps the most alluring title, and certainly the best 'read' of the year was James Sharpe's *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: a Horrible and True Story of Football, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England*, about goings-on in North Moreton some 400 years ago, and based in part on earlier research in Berkshire Record Office.

STAFF

During the year we said farewell to two members of staff, Roberta Ciocci, Conservation Assistant, who moved to take up a post in the National Library of Scotland, and Tony Ward, our long-serving conservation binder, who took early retirement. Both posts remained unfilled at the year's end. We also congratulated Jeremy Taylor who passed his final examinations to qualify as a professional archivist.

Many members of staff continued to contribute significantly to professional matters nationally and to the promotion of historical and archival concerns locally. The County Archivist served as Vice-President of the Berkshire Family History Society, as General Editor of the Berkshire Record Society, and as a member of the Council of the Berkshire Archaeological Society. He also continued to hold the post of Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Reading and was invited to represent the South East Regional Archives Council on the Thames Valley Cultural Forum.

Elizabeth Hughes, Senior Archivist, served as secretary of the British Records Association and as a member of the South East Regional Archives Council. Sabina Sutherland, Senior Archivist, served as a member of the council of the Berkshire Record Society and as a member of the committee of the Reading Branch of the Historical Association, Mark Stevens, Senior Archivist, served as secretary of the Society of Archivists' Legislation Panel, as the Society's careers officer, and as a member of its Career Development Panel.

STATISTICS

Public Use	1999/2000	1998/1999
Visitors	6245	6554
Enquiries: post and e-mail	921	884
Enquiries: telephone	7326	7194
Reprographics	6465	
Items consulted: originals	6292	7715
Items consulted: microform and transcript	9058	9342
Talks and visits		
Number of talks	14	27
People attending		611
Accessioning and cataloguing		
Accessions received	164	199
Accessions catalogued	138	174
Items catalogued	4998	1643