

BERKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

ANNUAL REPORT

2000-2001

INTRODUCTION

On 28 February 2001 the new Berkshire Record Office was officially opened by Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal. Her Royal Highness was welcomed at the Record Office by Sir William Benyon, Vice Lieutenant of Berkshire, and introduced to a number of guests, including the High Sheriff, the Mayor of Reading and the Chairman of West Berkshire Council. This was followed by a tour of the Office, during which Her Royal Highness saw exhibitions of some of the documents in the Record Office's care, and met representatives of other Berkshire authorities, staff, and users of the service. In her speech at the opening ceremony Her Royal Highness stressed the importance of archives services as a cultural and educational resource, and spoke of their value as a community asset to an ever-increasing number of people. This very happy event represented the culmination of four years of planning, preparation and building, and marked in a very positive way the beginning of a new chapter in the Record Office's history

The path to the opening of the Record Office, however, was certainly not a smooth one, and was marked by several frustrating setbacks. The building, which should have been completed in December 1999, and opened to the public in April 2000, was not finally handed over to West Berkshire Council, the commissioning authority, until July 2000; the planned two-month closure was extended to eight months; and even at the year's end numerous problems remained to be resolved. Thanks to the forbearance of our landlords, Foster Wheeler Engineering Ltd, we were able to retain possession of the strongroom accommodation at Shinfield Park for an additional six months, but we had to vacate the public searchroom and office area. Temporary accommodation for a very limited public service, providing access to microforms and transcripts only, was provided by courtesy of Reading Library Service in the former bindery room at Battle Library. This service operated from May to September and was greatly appreciated by users, who were unfailingly understanding of and sympathetic to our difficulties.

The move into the new Record Office building occupied some eight weeks between late July and mid-September. For some six weeks, three large lorries daily made the journey from Shinfield Park to Coley Avenue, carrying the thousands of boxes, volumes, rolls, plans and other items that had filled the four miles of shelving in the old Record Office strongrooms. A seventh week was occupied in bringing various large pieces of equipment that had been placed temporarily in store. Finally, on 18 September, material and equipment was transferred from the temporary public searchroom at Battle Library. The remainder of September was occupied in getting straight, ensuring that everything was in place for the public opening which took place on 3 October, preceded by a small and informal ceremony attended by representatives of Berkshire's unitary authorities.

The move itself was preceded by an immense amount of work, preparing material for transfer and making detailed location plans for items in the new building, so that every object moved had its final resting place identified before it even left its old home. Most of this was carried out in the previous year and was described in last year's annual report, but further

improvements to storage were possible in the extra weeks of waiting, and full opportunity was made of this extra time.

Since the public opening in October, a great deal of public interest has been shown in the Record Office, amply justifying the Princess Royal's remarks about the value of the service to the community. Use of the public search room in the last six months of the year showed an increase of nearly 40% over the equivalent period in recent years, and many favourable comments were received.

In spite of the demands of the move and related activities, important steps were taken to develop the service. The Record Office was involved in three major collaborative projects to promote access to archives. It participated in a national 'Access to Archives' project to put copies of court records on-line; it shared in a joint project with other record offices in the south-east to promote access to archives relating to landed estates; and it was invited to go through to the second stage of its joint application with the Rural History Centre at Reading University for funds to digitise key records relating to farming in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of these projects will make information about Berkshire records much more widely available and will contribute substantially to the Office's objectives to encourage research and to widen opportunities for access. Towards the end of the year the Office began preparations for the Best Value Review of the service, which is to take place in 2001/2002.

All told, and in spite of setbacks and frustrations, the year was both exciting and successful, and marked a significant stage in the Office's history. But none of the achievements would have been possible without the hard work of staff and colleagues. As usual it is a pleasure to be able to record publicly my gratitude to all those who have 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, to our depositors and volunteers, and, last but by no means least, to the Record Office staff themselves.

Peter Durrant
December 2001

THE BUILDING

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, Reading. 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 low roofline, 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. A considerable amount of car parking has been provided at the rear of Yeomanry House.

The new Record Office is in the shape of the letter T. At the southern end, the top stroke of the T provides strongroom accommodation for six miles of records – sufficient (on the basis of recent accrual rates) for at least the next fifteen years. There are six strongrooms altogether, on two floors. These have been designed 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. The main strongroom on the ground floor has been fitted out with extra-large shelving to provide storage for the Record Office's map collection, some items in which are as much as twelve feet (366 cm) long, and also with twenty-four plan chests (containing nearly 300 drawers) to hold the various maps, charters, large volumes and other items too large for boxes and requiring flat 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 searchroom 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.

In the new searchroom there have been other improvements besides the increase in accommodation. Catalogues and indices 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. There is an increase in the number of microfiche readers available, and film and fiche have been rearranged to be more spread out and at more convenient heights. Power points are available by each viewer and also at each manuscript reading place. Much of the Office's extensive reference library is available on open-access shelves in the searchroom; the remainder, stored behind the scenes, is readily available on request.

Unfortunately the building was not complete at handover, and as already mentioned, a number of problems remained outstanding at the year's end. Most particularly, difficulties have been experienced with the air-conditioning system, which is not providing the appropriate conditions for document storage. At the end of the year specialist consultants were engaged by West Berkshire Council to investigate the problem and propose a remedy. Their report is awaited.

PUBLIC SERVICE

Search Room and Enquiry Services

For the first six months of the year the Record Office's public service operated under considerable difficulties. No access to documents was possible at all during April. As delays to the building accumulated it was decided to make temporary arrangements to allow access to microforms, transcripts, indexes, and a limited range of printed material. By courtesy of Reading Library Service, the former bindery room at Battle Library in Oxford Road, Reading, was made available. This was furnished and fitted up to provide a public searchroom for ten people, and accommodation for a small number of staff. In spite of the inconvenience, the service provided was greatly appreciated by users, who were unfailingly sympathetic and understanding. Although for obvious reasons user numbers were down on the previous year (approximately one-third of normal) the searchroom was busy and active. Written enquiries, for perhaps not unconnected reasons, increased by over 30%. This arrangement lasted throughout the summer, finally closing on 15 September. The following week the resources at Battle were transferred to the new Record Office, which opened to the public on 3 October.

Various additions improvements were made to the range of information provided in the searchroom. All the information leaflets were revised to take account of new arrangements. Certain handlists (for example those covering Berkshire probate records, non-parochial registers, and electoral registers) were also revised, and a new handlist of Berkshire hearth tax returns was compiled. Staff used the time made available by the enforced delay to compile new street indexes to census returns for all Berkshire towns: these are now available for 1841-1891 for Abingdon, Faringdon, Maidenhead, Newbury, Reading, Wallingford, Windsor and Wokingham.

As already mentioned, the second half of the year saw a substantial increase in use. Comparison with the last similar period at Shinfield Park shows a rise of nearly 40% in visitors and of nearly 60% in remote enquiries. Visitors were generally very pleased with the new facilities, particularly the more spacious surroundings and the natural light. There were, admittedly, one or two teething problems (cold air blown upwards from the vents in the floor being the most prominent) but most of these were solved by the end of the year. Comments such 'the facilities are impressive', and 'a light and airy Record Office which is a delight to work in' were among the favourable remarks received from visitors.

Enquiries were as wide-ranging as ever, in spite of the reduced service. Family history enquiries once again accounted for the majority of these, but other subjects included medieval markets and fairs, eighteenth-century Jamaican history, and social conditions at the outset of the English civil war.

Outreach

Very little outreach was undertaken during the first half of the year, since facilities for visitors were non-existent, and staff were fully employed in preparing for or taking part in the move.

However, from October a modest programme resumed. Talks were given to ten local societies, and one group visited the Record Office. Displays of original documents were mounted for the October opening and for the official opening in February. At the latter event demonstrations of the work of the Conservation Unit were also provided. The opening events also attracted media publicity, and good coverage was achieved in the local press. A further exhibition, about Charles Wooldridge, whose execution in Reading in 1896 provided the inspiration for Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, was mounted in connection with the Wilde centenary. News of Record Office activities continued to be publicised through the Office's newsletter, *The Berkshire Echo*, four issues of which were published during the year.

In February the Office received a visit from the Mayor of Reading and his guests on the Mayor's civic day. A brief introductory talk by the County Archivist was followed by a tour of the building.

Lectures and Educational Work

As was the case with outreach, educational work was restricted because of work associated with the move. However, a number of activities took place in the latter part of the year. The County Archivist led day schools on enclosure records (for Reading University Department of Continuing Education) and on records of the New Poor Law (for the University of Oxford Department of External Studies). He also gave a presentation at a symposium arranged by the Foundation for Ephemera Studies held at the Public Record Office.

Links with Reading University continued in other directions. The County Archivist spoke to second year history undergraduates about using local sources for final year BA dissertations, and led a session in the Record Office for students of mediaeval history on mediaeval records. He also lectured to Music department MA students on sources for the history of the organ, and contributed a paper on the same subject to the annual conference of the British Institute for Organ Studies.

Professional education was supported in February when the South East Region of the Society of Archivists held one of its regular meetings in the Record Office.

ACCESSIONING, CATALOGUING, RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

Accessions

Accessions during the year were slightly fewer in number and overall were slightly smaller in volume than in recent years, but were scarcely less wide-ranging. New deposits were actively discouraged during the first six months, except where records might have been regarded as at risk. However, if business was quiet to begin with, this was more than compensated for in the second part of the year, when records arrived in droves. Altogether 158 accessions were received, amounting to a little under 2.5 cubic metres.

Two of the most exciting accessions were also the most unexpected. The parish copy of the South Moreton tithe map, dating from 1849, had long been thought lost, and news that it had been discovered in a collection of records lodged in Cornwall Record Office was as welcome as it was surprising. Through the good offices of the County Archivist of Cornwall, arrangements were made to return it to its rightful home. Not long after this, the archaeologist and television broadcaster Julian Richards presented the Record Office with a hitherto unknown enclosure award for East Compton. Dated 1741 (and thus quite early for such a document) it includes a map by Andrew Northcroft, whose maps of Chaddleworth and Newbury are already held in the Record Office.

Such discoveries, however, should not overshadow the many other important accessions received during the year. One of the most substantial of these was a fine collection of records relating to an estate in the White Waltham area, including deeds, 1551-1876, manor of Heywood court rolls, 1564-1802, and a fascinating book containing printed and manuscript material relating to the rebuilding of Maidenhead Chapel, 1822-1825. This last contained sketches of the ground plan of the previous chapel showing the Cookham/Bray parish boundary neatly bisecting the high altar. Other records of early date included a mid-sixteenth-century coloured map of waterways in Cookham, apparently prepared in connection with a law-suit; a survey of Brimpton and Shalford dated 1622; the nuncupative will of a reading merchant, Clement Kent, who died abroad in 1661 (all acquired by purchase); and a somewhat damaged but nevertheless very interesting map of Earley Common Field and Common Mead, 1669 (transferred from the Wiltshire and Swindon Record Office).

Nonconformists were once again well represented with records coming from St Paul's United Reformed Church, Reading, 1897-2000; Spencers Wood United Reformed Church, 1901-1995; and Woodley Methodist Church, 1960-1990s. The Spencers Wood records included, unexpectedly, a cuttings album from Trinity Congregational Church, Reading, dating from the turn of the century. Records relating to Fyfield Village Mission, 1904-1941, and to King's Road Baptist Church, Reading, 1911-1914, were also received, while local Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed churches continued the excellent practice of depositing current year books, plans and directories, thus ensuring the preservation of present-day material for the future.

Parish records were deposited by twenty-two parishes from all parts of the archdeaconry. Many of these included recent material, but nineteenth-century records came from Beech Hill (1868-

1996) and Grazeley (1854-1968), in both cases going back to the foundation of the parish; from Easthamstead (1822-1994); from Stubbings (1858-1964); and from Aston Tirrold (1862-1971).

Relatively few school records were received, reflecting to some extent the Record Office's success in previous years in securing deposits. However, records of the Windsor Royal Free and Industrial School, 1862-1915, and from the Princess Margaret Rose School and its predecessors, 1889-1979, were welcome additions to existing holdings. A substantial collection of records relating to St Stephen's College, the school associated with the Community of St John Baptist, Clewer, was also received, as was single account book of Southmoor Preparatory School. Both of these were welcome as coming from schools in the private sector, which (by comparison with LEA schools) are not so well represented in the collections.

Finally, mention should be made of a few other accessions, if only to give a picture of the range and variety of records received. In May the Office was successful in purchasing at auction a small bundle of letters of Mary Russell Mitford, dating from the 1840s and 50s, in which she expresses her strong approval of Ruskin, her equally strong disapproval of the poet Browning, and her views generally on the literature of the day. Posters and programmes of the Reading Show, 1941-1986, were received in two separate accessions in May and July. The Show developed out of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign during the second world war and flourished in the 1950s and 60s, before finally closing in the 1980s. This collection is believed to contain the only complete set of programmes to survive. In June came a further deposit of papers, 1804-2000, from the family of the local historian Violet Howse of Stanford in the Vale. Later in the year came the Boxford tithe map, 1849, records of Old Windsor Parish Council, 1886-1994, and deeds of Blatch's Theale Brewery, 1763-1972, followed early in 2002 by deeds of the Boar's Head public house, Reading, 1810-1835, and records dating from the 1860s of Hedges' Iron Foundry, Bucklebury.

Cataloguing

Very little cataloguing was possible this year, and output was dramatically reduced by comparison with the previous year. Although 65 catalogues (representing 68 accessions) were completed, these were almost all of very small collections. No major catalogue was attempted.

Priority in cataloguing was accorded to parish records and recent accessions. Eighteen parish catalogues were completed, including records from South Moreton, 1783-1994; Speenhamland, 1829-1977; Letcombe Regis, 1837-1992; Grazeley, 1854-1968; and Beech Hill, 1868-1996. The South Moreton records now available include two important volumes of overseers' accounts, together with a small bundle of bills, dating from 1783 to 1808, containing a detailed record 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. The recently discovered tithe map, mentioned above, was also catalogued. The Speenhamland records included a circular soliciting subscriptions for building the chapel, 1829, and papers on enlarging the

building, 1876-1890 and 1911. Church building was also featured in the newly catalogued records from Letcombe Regis, which included a letter from Archdeacon James Randall to the churchwardens noting the 'state of great disrepair' of the church. The church was subsequently restored, and although these papers do not directly refer to the restoration, there is among them an estimate for the repair of the church clock, bearing a contemporary note that 'the above alterations will make it a Valueable Clock and a great boon to the Village as the Clock would indicate the Correct time'! Registers from Beech Hill and a vestry minute book from Grazeley, mentioned above and dating back to the very earliest days of these two nineteenth-century churches, were also catalogued during the year

Other records catalogued included some of the recent accessions mentioned above, among them the managers' minutes of Windsor Royal Free and Industrial School, 1862-1915, and log books and other records of The Princess Margaret Rose School and its predecessors, 1889-1979; correspondence concerning King's Road Baptist Church, Reading, 1911-1914; and an account book of Fyfield Village Mission, 1904-1941. In addition the catalogue of the records of the recently-closed Theale United Reformed Church, 1844-1996, was completed. The church was formally constituted in 1844, and the records include a church book beginning in that year, and containing information about church members and some church activities. Catalogues of several small collections of deeds were also completed, relating to properties in East Hendred, 1910-1980; Welford, 1733; Maidenhead, 1909-1964; North Moreton (Stapleton's Chantry), 1738-1862; Reading, 1828-1971; Speen, 1804; and Sutton Courtenay, 1621.

Research and Publication

As in previous years, the most popular subject for research was family history, but research activity was by no means limited to this, and the diversity of subjects studied showed no signs of abating. Local and regional studies remain the most numerous, but local evidence is often sought as part of a project of wider remit. 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 in 2000/2001 were drama in late mediaeval Reading, eighteenth-century London town houses, prison history, enclosure, the old Poor Law, and Moulsoford Asylum gardens.

During the year volume five in the Berkshire Record Series, *Enclosure in Berkshire, 1485-1885*, was published. Edited by Dr Ross Wordie of The University of Reading, this volume contains an introductory survey of the progress of enclosure in Berkshire over the four centuries from 1485, a parish-by-parish summary of the evidence for enclosure, and complete transcripts of a number of key documents. The greater part of the evidence presented was taken from documents held in the Record Office, and this volume marks a milestone in the study of

this subject, both in Berkshire and more widely, as it is the first time that evidence for a whole county has been treated in this way.

Members of the Record Office staff contributed articles to *Berkshire Old and New*. ‘Yet each man kills the thing he loves’ was a short note by Mark Stevens and Sabina Sutherland, written to accompany the exhibition on Charles Wooldridge, referred to earlier. Peter Durrant wrote about the new Berkshire Record Office for the same journal.

Numerous publications by users of the Record Office appeared during the year, including (to name only a few) *The History of Christ Church CE Primary School, Reading, 1868-000*, by Derek Crisp; *Barkham: a History*, by David French and Janet Firth; a seventy-fifth anniversary history of Farley Hill School, by Pauline Jones and Marina Goldsmith; *A Brief History of the Reading British School*, by a group of Katesgrove residents; and histories of *Cheapside, in the Forest of Windsor*, by Christine Weightman; *West Hagbourne*, by West Hagbourne Village History Group; and *Winkfield*, by the Winkfield History Project Group. Work such as this is immensely valuable in bringing the holdings of the Record Office closer to local communities and allowing them to share in the riches of the archives.

RECORD OFFICE LIBRARY

During the year, the Berkshire Record Office library continued to add to its book stock. We either subscribe to or receive complimentary copies of about four dozen local and national organisations’ journals, newsletters and annual reports, relating to local history, genealogy, architecture and archaeology, as well as publications on archive policy and practice.

Local authors, as in previous years, have given us copies of their work – some thirty instances this year – and we have been pleased to receive further millennium histories from different points of the county: Stanford in the Vale, Hungerford, Hurley, Barkham, Winkfield, and Cheapside, Sunninghill.

Notes and biographies have been gratefully received on the Jackson, Barefoot, Benwell, Ashridge and Ralph families.

Included among donations from academic researchers have been an article on James Hunter, who had connections with Beech Hill and was a friend of Handel, and a dissertation on the nineteenth-century Coleshill Estate and Model Farm.

With a small budget allocated to the library we have made a number of purchases, such as new guides to tithe and enclosure records, three volumes of indexes to PCC wills and administrations (with a long-term view to building up a set of these rare and expensive books), and, for public use at a new computer in the searchroom, the 1881 census on CD-ROM.

CONSERVATION, PRESERVATION AND MICROFILMING

Conservation and Preservation

For the first six months of the year the conservation workshop was out of action, as material and equipment had been packed and stored in readiness for the move. Consequently very little practical work was possible. Conservation staff assisted with preparing documents for the move, rewrapping and improving storage, but for most of the period were seconded to Reading Museum where they carried out work on the art on paper collection, cleaning items and removing them from old acidic mounting board, repairing where necessary, and remounting on archival board. The prints and drawings were then placed in polyester envelopes by Museum staff.

From October onwards conservation work was resumed. Documents treated included two bundles of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century parish settlement papers from Sutton Courtenay, a deed of Cookham manor dated 1773, an early twentieth-century map of the Southcote area, Reading, and a very badly damaged plan of the graveyard at Subbings, near Maidenhead, 1900. The routine but important work of preparing documents for storage, and replacing old packaging with purpose made wrappings was also restarted. In addition to this, Conservation staff were involved in preparing documents for the several exhibitions noted earlier.

Consultancy services were provided to Eton College archives (on the storage of a series of audit books), to Reading School (on the conservation and storage of a collection of prints, photographs, volumes and school caps), and to St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, on the preparation of a collection of deeds prior to microfilming.

Microfilming

Microfilming continued with less interruption than in most other areas of the Office's work, as the microfilming room at Shinfield Park was operational almost until the start of the move. Microfilming is important as a preservation tool, since it provides, relatively cheaply, copies of records that can be used in place of fragile originals. The Record Office routinely films parish registers and electoral registers, since these are records that are much in demand. Some 366 parish registers were filmed during the year, and 165 volumes of electoral registers, both drawn from all parts of the county. A further 330 items were filmed for conservation or security reasons. Microfilming services were also provided to Social Services departments in Bracknell, Reading and West Berkshire as an income generation activity.

STAFF

During the year we said farewell to Elizabeth Hughes, Senior Archivist Public Services, who left to take up the post of County Archivist in East Sussex. Elizabeth joined the staff in 1991 and made a major contribution to the service during her decade in Berkshire. Many of the improvements to the searchroom and public services during the 1990s were made on her initiative, and she also played a key role in planning the new office. Her promotion was well-deserved, but our loss was great.

Three new colleagues joined the staff during the year: Ted Ridgewell as Archives Assistant (Strongrooms), and Julie Grisman and Jane Powell as Searchroom Assistants.

Several members of staff continued to contribute significantly to professional matters nationally and to the promotion of historical and archival concerns locally. Peter Durrant served as Vice-president of the Berkshire Family History Society, as General Editor of the Berkshire Record Society, as a member of the Council of the Berkshire Archaeological Society, and as a committee member of the Reading Branch of the Historical Association. He also continued to hold the post of Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Reading. Elizabeth Hughes served as secretary of the British Records Association and as a member of the South East Regional Archives Council. Mark Stevens, Senior Archivist, served as secretary of the Society of Archivists Legislation Sub-committee, as chair of the joint Society of Archivists/British Records Association working party on title deeds, and as member of the Society of Archivists Continuing Development Sub-committee. Sabina Sutherland served on the Council of the Berkshire Record Society and on the committee of the Reading Branch of the Historical Association. Sarah Edmondson served as assistant secretary of the British Records Association.

STATISTICS

Public Use	2000/2001	1999/2000
Visitors	5729	6245
Enquiries: post and e-mail	1339	921
Enquiries: telephone	9141	7326
Reprographics	5262	6465
Items consulted: originals	4245	6292
Items consulted: microform and transcript	29604	9058
Talks and visits		
Number of talks	17	14
People attending	327	
Accessioning and cataloguing		
Accessions received	158	164
Accessions catalogued	68	138
Items catalogued	262	4998