

BERKSHIRE RECORD OFFICE

ANNUAL REPORT

2005-2006

INTRODUCTION

Two major cataloguing projects completed; a third begun; grant-aid of over £150,000 received or awarded to support cataloguing and outreach projects: these are among the highlights of another busy and successful year for Berkshire Record Office. These, together with the more modest but nevertheless essential tasks of maintaining the public service, negotiating with depositors and securing new archives for the collections, accessioning and cataloguing of the many new acquisitions received during the year, carrying out essential conservation and preservation work, supporting educational and community use and enjoyment of the records, are among the achievements recorded in the pages that follow.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the hard work of staff and the support of our colleagues in Reading Borough Council and the other Unitary Authorities in Berkshire, members of Archives Board, our depositors, our volunteers, and our many friends. It is, as it always is, a pleasure to record my thanks to them all.

Peter Durrant
County Archivist
October 2006

BEST VALUE REVIEW

2005/6 brought us to the fourth year of our five-year Best Value Improvement and Implementation Plan. The plan, adopted in June 2002, has four main themes: doing more with what we've got, listening, building partnerships, and new horizons - chosen to reflect our need to be effective stewards, our wish to be responsive to customers' needs, our awareness that we cannot do everything on our own, and our ambition to be adventurous and imaginative in developing services.

The year saw a number of achievements in all these areas:

We achieved excellent local and national media coverage for the service

We participated in the biennial national survey of visitors to record offices

We commissioned and received a marketing strategy for the service and have begun to implement its recommendations

We commenced work on our project to catalogue and conserve the records of Fair Mile Hospital, supported by a grant from the Wellcome Trust

We commenced work on the creation of an on-line database of manorial records, supported by a grant from the Marc Fitch Fund

We won a further grant from the Wellcome Trust to catalogue and conserve the records of Broadmoor Hospital

We held or shared in a number of events to raise public awareness of the service

Many of these achievements will be referred to later in the report.

PUBLIC SERVICE

Search Room and Enquiry Services

Our searchroom and enquiry services remain our most direct points of contact with our users. Personal visits offer opportunities for in-depth and extended research that cannot be matched, and we are keen to promote the service available and to make sure that, for newcomers and old hands alike, the atmosphere in the Record Office is welcoming and friendly and the service knowledgeable and efficient. It seems that we are succeeding. Comments such as *'the help I have had from the Berkshire Archives regarding my family history research has been wonderful'*, *'thank you for being so helpful. The nicest RO we have seen in 7 years research'*, and *'very pleasant experience - lovely office and helpful staff'*, are typical of those we have received, and suggest that for the great majority of our visitors the experience of coming to the Record Office to carry out research in person is a very positive one.

For those who are unable to come in person, or who wish to explore the availability of sources before travelling, we offer a research and enquiry service. This too has drawn appreciative comments from satisfied customers, with remarks such as *'thank you for setting out all the information so beautifully and clearly - a very nice piece of work. Your prompt and professional service is much appreciated'* indicating a high level of satisfaction.

Service guarantees were close to being reached on all fronts: 99% of readers were able to come on the day of their choice, 94% of enquiries were answered within five days, and virtually all reprographics orders were completed within the guarantee period.

In an era of increased competition from online information providers it is gratifying to report that user figures are holding up. We experienced a slight fall in personal visits, but written enquiries increased by 5%.

We continued to run the quarterly 'Introduction to the Search Room' sessions that we began in 2004/5: these remain popular and are well-subscribed. We reorganised our sales area, installed an improved vending machine providing hot and cold drinks, and we introduced facilities for credit card payment for sales and research fees.

Remote Access

Notwithstanding some technical problems, our enclosure website, www.berkshirenclosure.org.uk, launched in 2004/5, proved a continuing success story. It has provided an enormously valuable resource for the study of Parliamentary enclosure in Berkshire as well as making available information about landscape and landowners and occupiers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One appreciative user wrote: *'I write to congratulate you on what you have achieved. This is the best service of*

its kind I have found in the whole of the UK. The quality and scope of the primary and secondary sources on enclosure in Berkshire that you are providing online is remarkable. One can only hope that your approach to public access to your records is followed by other Record Offices.'

Our own information website, www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk, continued to attract visits. In the months for which figures are available we saw use rise by 50% (following a 27% rise in 2004/5). We also had nearly 75,000 catalogue views on the national a2a website, a slight increase on the previous year.

Outreach

We held two receptions during the year to mark the completion of major cataloguing projects. In the spring the Vice-Lord-Lieutenant of Berkshire, Lady Elizabeth Godsal, was guest of honour at a reception to celebrate the conclusion of a long-running project to catalogue records of the Methodist Church in Berkshire. The project resulted in the cataloguing of over 3000 records from more than one hundred churches and chapels, spanning a period of almost 200 years, and released for research a wealth of information about an important non-conformist presence in Berkshire. Through it we gained some useful publicity, including reports in the local press and in the (national) *Methodist Recorder*.

In the autumn the Lord-Lieutenant, Mr Philip Wroughton, hosted a reception to mark the completion of our architectural records cataloguing project. (This is mentioned in more detail under 'cataloguing' below). In association with the Minster Church of St Mary in Reading, the Record Office arranged a service of sung evensong, an exhibition and a reception to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Samuel Wilberforce, the distinguished reforming bishop of Oxford 1845-1869.

In January we took a stand at the family history fair at Bracknell Sports Centre, doing brisk business with many of the hundreds of family historians who descend on that annual event. We also held two open days at the Record Office, one in September to coincide with the Heritage weekend, and one in February, linked to the BBC's broadcast of 'Who do you think you are?' On the latter occasion we worked closely with the Berkshire Family History Society.

Talks and visits continued to be popular, with a diverse audience including members of Berkshire Women's Institutes, the Friends of the Royal Borough Collection, Reading Rotary Club, and the Mid and West Berks Countryside Local Access Forum. We had several pieces in the media besides the Methodist coverage already mentioned. Amongst other reports, our architectural records project attracted attention in the local press, and our Family History open day secured an interview on BBC Radio Berkshire, while Meridian TV featured plans of the old Shire Hall from our collections in its report on the newly-opened Forbury Hotel. In addition to this we have had regular pieces in the Berkshire Family Historian and in the newsletters of

both the Berkshire the Oxfordshire Local History Societies, and we have continued to publish our own quarterly newsletter, *The Berkshire Echo*.

During the year we commenced work on a new marketing strategy. This was funded by a grant of £15,000 from what was then SEMLAC that we shared with the Museum of English Rural Life. We commissioned Sam Evans, then Head of Marketing at The National Archives, to write the strategy. Her report, which included an action plan, was delivered in January 2006. Work on implementing the plan began during the year and will continue into 2006/7.

Lectures and Educational Work

Supporting life-long learning has always been an important part of the Record Office's work, whether through formal teaching or more informal means. As in previous years, the Record Office concentrated its direct input in 2005/6 into postgraduate and adult education. I taught a day school on Quarter Sessions records for Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, and we hosted classes for an Open University course on Crime and Policing, a Reading University course on the history of art and architecture, and for a group of Reading University postgraduates studying mediaeval history, and I spoke to second-year undergraduates at Reading as part of their preparation for their final-year dissertation. I also gave the keynote lecture at the Berkshire Family History Society's thirtieth anniversary conference. As mentioned above, we continued to run our successful introductory classes for beginners. Resources do not permit us to provide an educational programme for schools, but we have committed ourselves to providing support for educational programmes aimed at schools run by colleagues in our partner authorities.

Professional visits and support

We received visits from professional colleagues in libraries, archives and museums interested in discovering more about the Record Office, including staff from Berkshire Archaeology, Reading, Slough and Wokingham Libraries, and Gwent Records Committee. Mark Stevens spoke about our marketing strategy at a conference in Winchester arranged by SEMLAC.

ACCESSIONING, CATALOGUING, RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

Accessions

During the year under review some 6.8 cubic metres of records were added to the collections in the Record Office, and although size isn't everything it is one measure of our success in discovering new resources for the study of Berkshire's history. Another measure is the range and quality of the records themselves and the diverse places from which they come. We have received records from local authorities, schools, churches, local societies, charities, solicitors, the coroner, and from numerous individuals, all of whom have helped to ensure that the documentary evidence for the county's past will be preserved. The records offered have ranged in date from the middle ages to the twenty-first century, and have included minute books, account books, parish registers, maps, a court register, deeds, sale catalogues, and photograph albums.

Full details of these will be released as they are catalogued and become available for research.

Cataloguing

The often-unsung work of cataloguing is one of the essential behind-the-scenes tasks in any record office. Requiring meticulous care in identification and description, it can be very rewarding, though it can equally often (and sometimes simultaneously) be laborious and time-consuming, demanding considerable skill and background research. Through this work documents that would otherwise be buried deep in unlisted collections become available for study, and through the dissemination of catalogues beyond the record office, wider opportunities for research are made available.

Among the 168 catalogues completed during the year, three stand out for size and importance: the records of Reading Municipal Charities, the collection of annual returns of Berkshire charities to the Charity Commission, and the architectural drawings of public buildings from the Berkshire County Council archives.

The records of Reading Municipal Charities date from the twelfth century and continue to the twenty-first (one volume in our custody is actually still in use, though the first entry was made in 1640!) Most of the records of benefactions relate, as one would expect, to Reading, but several charities owned property outside the borough and one important component of this collection is the remarkable accumulation of nearly 250 mediaeval deeds, of land mostly in Bray but also in other east Berkshire parishes and further afield. More than thirty charities are represented in this collection, including John a'Larder's charity, the Green Girls and Blue Coat School foundations, and the charities founded by John Blagrove, John Kendrick, and Archbishop Laud. They variously provided almshouses, food clothing and fuel for the poor, education, apprenticeship and dowries for poor girls.

Some additionally provided support for bell-ringing, repair of church fabric, maintenance of a family vault, and annual sermons. John a'Larder's charity records include the fifteenth-century wooden box in which the charity deeds were originally stored, as well as an account book and rental of Reading properties dating from 1510; John Blgrave's records include a splendid late-sixteenth-century map of Southcote attached to a lease of property there; John Kendrick's records include three volumes and one bundle of accounts relating to his workhouse charity, 1626-1651; and Archbishop Laud's records include documents relating to apprenticeships from 1640. Altogether this collection comprises over one thousand books, bundles and documents.

Less ancient, but still impressive, is the collection of annual returns of Berkshire charities to the Charity Commissioners comprising several thousand returns from over 700 charities. The earliest returns date from 1836, though most are from the first half of the last century. They are mainly financial in nature, though some include annual reports. The collection gives important insight into the extent and nature of charitable activity in Berkshire in the half-century before the introduction of the welfare state, covering both direct relief for the poor (in cash or kind), provision for the sick (including medical supplies and the costs of convalescence - and travel to distant convalescent homes), support for education, and the provision of community facilities, including village halls, residential homes, a swimming pool and a volunteer fire brigade.

Also dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but completely different in nature and content are the architectural drawings of public buildings in Berkshire from the archives of the former Berkshire County Council. This collection comprises some 2000 drawings of more than 350 County Council buildings dating from 1863 to 1972. They include site plans, ground and floor plans, elevations, sections and details. The majority of drawings are original design drawings, though the collection includes some measured drawings prepared as the basis for extensions or alterations. Most date from after the establishment of the County Council in 1889, but a few are earlier in date and represent buildings that the Council inherited from predecessor authorities. (The earliest of all are plans and elevations of Hungerford police station). By far the greatest number are of schools and educational establishments. The remainder includes a wide variety of County Council buildings, among them the Shire Hall, libraries, residential homes, fire stations, police stations and magistrates' courts. The majority of the designs were prepared by County Council staff, but a significant minority were the work of architects in private practice, and several local practices are represented. Many of the drawings are almost works of art, and are extremely attractive to look at. Several give an insight into forgotten deprivations: a site plan of 1909 shows the location of the water supply for Harwell primary school - at a considerable distance from the school buildings; while plans for Welford and Wickham primary school show that it did not acquire indoor toilets until 1966.

Besides these major pieces of work, we have completed 52 catalogues of parish records, comprising over 900 items, with records dating from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. The earliest of the records now available as a result of this work is a glebe terrier dated 1677 from Sunninghill, preserved along with another of 1704 and various other documents apparently in connection with a lawsuit on the property of the glebe in 1769. Also from Sunninghill are documents relating to a proposed new church in 1825 and (following the rejection of these plans) papers relating to the enlargement of the existing church. Other early nineteenth-century records now available include a register of banns from Hurley beginning in 1798 and a deed of land added to Swallowfield churchyard in 1825.

Other catalogues include a wonderful collection of papers relating to Methodism in Berkshire collected by Mrs V M Ayres of Reading; a set of scrapbooks relating to amateur dramatic productions in Reading, 1935-1968; records of the Alderman family of Kintbury, 1712-1939; records of Dedworth Green Baptist Church, 1927-2000; letters patent granting Easthampstead Park to William Trumbull, 1636; miscellaneous records of Windsor schools, 1887-1997; photograph albums of the Cave family of Bracknell, including many interesting nineteenth-century views of Berkshire and elsewhere; and records of the Windsor and Eton Society, 1946-2005.

Altogether we completed 169 catalogues during the year, comprising 4700 items.

Research and Publication

While the most popular subject for investigation remains family history, the research carried out in the Record Office during the year was by no means limited to this. Indeed, the subjects of research were extremely diverse. A good number of our users were engaged in the study of their own community, some as individuals, others as members of research groups. Some of these studies have resulted in publications, while others are still in progress. We have also supported students working for both first and higher degrees, academics, authors, and interested individuals. Subjects of study have included the poor law, enclosure, Vauxhall Gardens, Stanley Spencer, Anglo-Saxon charter boundaries, allotments, Berkshire Lord Lieutenants, the battle of Newbury, bell-ringing in Wokingham, the Berkshire gentry in the seventeenth century, Windsor pewterers, nineteenth-century church building, and Charles Dickens' links with Thomas Talfourd, the Reading judge who was also the dedicatee of *The Pickwick Papers*. Several visitors were involved in preparing volumes for publication by the Berkshire Record Society.

In addition to those carrying out their own research we receive regular visits from volunteers transcribing and indexing documents - a work which greatly increases access to often-difficult or fragile originals. This year work

concentrated on parish registers and coroners' records. We are very grateful to those who give up their time in this way.

During the year the Record Office published the first of a new series of mini-guides to sources, a *Guide World War 2 Records*, designed to provide a synopsis of the locally-held sources available on this subject and to encourage interest in it.

In the autumn, Berkshire Record Society published volumes 9 and 10 in the Berkshire Record Series, *Berkshire Nonconformist Meeting House Registrations, 1689-1852*, edited by Lisa Spurrier, a member of the Record Office staff. This makes extensive use of documents from the Record Office's collections, and provides valuable information about the spread of nonconformity in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Berkshire.

Other publications arising from research in the Record Office are noted in the section on the Office's library.

The Library

Although it does not attempt to be a comprehensive collection of secondary material on Berkshire, the Record Office library has an important role to play in supporting the work and research of the Office. Over 270 titles were acquired during the year, encompassing local historical studies, guides to records and research, reference works and professional literature. Several were based on research carried out in the Office.

Recent publications acquired include histories of Beech Hill Baptist Church, Battle Hospital and Workhouse, the villages of Brightwalton and Shippon, and Sandhurst in World War II; surveys of roads and their names in Cold Ash, Greenham and Windsor; and books and pamphlets about horse racing in Berkshire, nineteenth-century Berkshire squires, Wallingford charters, war memorials in Mortimer and Theale, and Radley vicarage. We were also given two theses (on *Landscape Archaeology and Boundaries* and *Parliamentary Enclosure*) whose authors had used Record Office source.

Many of the titles were acquired as gifts, both from authors and from friends, and we are grateful to the donors for their generosity.

CONSERVATION

Conservation and Preservation

The work of the Conservation Unit ranges from the painstaking reassembly of a document from its damaged fragments to the removal of rusty pins and staples. Much of it is unglamorous, and all of it takes time and patience, but it is essential if documents are to be safely preserved for the future and if damaged documents are to be made available for public study.

During the year preservation staff secured over 1200 loose pages in volumes by the process known as 'tipping-in' and re-sewed nearly 1900 pamphlets. Over one thousand documents received purpose-made wraps, while some 3500 items were 'encapsulated' - that is, placed within an inert transparent container. Documents treated in these ways include maps, plans, letters, parish magazines, annual reports, minute books and sales catalogues. A major part of the encapsulation programme was to protect an important collection of war-time photographs of Berkshire buildings taken under the auspices of the Berkshire Architectural Records Committee.

More substantial repair work was necessary in many cases. Among the documents selected for conservation treatment in 2005/6 were a thirteenth-century seal; a detailed survey of the manor of Hinton Waldrist, 1759; an inventory of the goods in Reading Baptist Chapel, 1797; a mid-nineteenth-century map of lands in Wokingham and Finchampstead; and sales catalogues of Hillfields in Burghfield and of the Maiden Erlegh estate in Earley. We also took apart and rebound an eighteenth-century parish register that had the misfortune to have been rebound once before - but with its pages in the wrong order!

During the year we were fortunate to have assistance from members of the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes who, having deposited a large collection of WI records, readily gave up their time to help us put them in order for storage in the strong rooms, and to undertake basic preservation work on them.

Microfilming

The preparation of substitute copies of popular documents is a necessary precaution against damage through over-use. Parish registers of baptisms, marriages, burials and banns, non-conformist registers, and school admission registers are particularly at risk. The Record Office is fortunate to have facilities to film these rapidly so that there is minimal delay in making copies available. During 2005/6 we filmed sixty-eight parish registers and over 200 school admission registers containing together over 14,000 pages, along with other parish records, cemetery records and nineteenth-century coroners' inquest files.

STAFFING

During the year we welcomed Brian Goucher as Strongroom Cleaner, Christine Dobson as Preservation Assistant, and Kate Tyte as Project Archivist for the Fair Mile Project. Ellie Thorne and Ellie Jones, who had worked as volunteers over the summer, joined as temporary Archive Assistants in the autumn. Julie Grisman, Archive Assistant, was appointed temporary Project Archivist at the Record Centre. We were pleased to congratulate Lindsay McCormack on achieving Registration with the Society of Archivists.

Several members of staff contributed significantly to professional matters nationally and to the promotion of historical and archival concerns locally. I served as Vice-President of the Berkshire Family History Society, as General Editor of the Berkshire Record Society, on Douai Abbey's Library Committee and on the London and South East Committee of Newsplan. Mark Stevens was elected to the (national) Council of the Society of Archivists, and served as Chair of its Publications Sub-committee and as a member of its Committee on Corporate Affairs. Sabina Sutherland served as Treasurer of the Reading Branch of the Historical Association and on the Council of the Berkshire Record Society. Lindsay McCormack served as Secretary and Treasurer of the Society of Archivists' Continuing Development Sub-committee. Lisa Spurrier served as a member of the Editorial Board of *Berkshire Old and New*.