

The Berkshire Record Office: how it all continued

This year (2008) sees the 60th anniversary of the creation of the Berkshire Record Office, the archives service for the Royal County. In this second part of BRO's history, we look at the story of the Office between 1981 and today.

2-4-6-8 Motorway

In 1981, the Record Office moved with the rest of Berkshire County Council to the new Shire Hall at Shinfield Park, Reading, beside junction 11 of the M4. County Archivist Amanda Arrowsmith wrote that the new Office enjoyed 'ample free car parking' as well as the 'Shire Hall restaurant open to visitors for meals and snacks'. More long-established searchers may remember both the restaurant and the mini-shop, the Shire Kabin. Opening hours were varied too - Monday morning openings were lost in favour of a new extended Thursday opening until 9pm.

The new Office enjoyed new fixtures and fittings, and much greater storage and research space. For the first time, all the staff and collections were together in one place. But this had come at a cost - neither the strongrooms, searchroom nor the offices had any windows. As Adam Green later commented, the Office had acquired 'cleaner and more commodious premises in the bowels of the new Shire Hall...staff were not as pleased as documents at being entirely cut off from natural light'. The Office was also buried far away from the entrance to the building. Visitors could easily get lost, and Amanda encouraged them to ask for help if they did.

The lack of sight lines in the strongrooms also made some visitors feel uncomfortable. One member of the County Council's legal team regularly reported sensing a green ghost in the smallest strongroom. Staff knew that the Ministry of Defence had occupied the site during World War Two, so it was possible that previous inhabitants might have left a guest behind. But despite a certain reluctance to venture into the smallest strongroom alone, no one in BRO ever saw the ghost.

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Significantly for BRO, after the move to Shire Hall it was also asked for the first time to run a Modern Records Centre, to manage the County's current records. Readers might like to note that this innovation was supposed to kick-start the paperless office by making every department store its filing centrally. It was all very hi-tech for 1981: an electronic transport system called a Telelift was installed in parts of the building to deliver files and return them to the Records Centre, and the Council set up a microfilming unit to begin providing image copies of its records.

The 1980s

This period saw a huge growth in family history research at BRO. Significantly, all the Archdeaconry probate records, and Diocesan copies of tithe maps were transferred to the Office. It saw countywide parish inspections after the Parochial Registers and Records Measure, after which many parish registers were deposited in the Office. Not surprisingly, visitor numbers increased enormously, as many key resources for family historians were now all available under one roof.

BRO also began sustained work with the Berkshire Family History Society through the Overseers Project, which would result in editions of over 10,000 case papers from the old poor law in the county. Work on the project spanned 1992-2004. The Office also sought to become more of a family history centre for local people without Berkshire relatives, acquiring the GRO index on microfiche amongst other things. A decade later and many of these resources are now available on the internet.

Bye-bye BCC, and hello pastures new

The Office moved again during the Shire Hall years - from the back of the building to a space nearer the front. This new area housed the searchroom and staff offices, and two windows overlooking the bin store. It was separate from the strongrooms, and trolleys full of documents often moved back and forth gracefully amongst Council staff on their way to the shop.

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Much of the second half of the 1990s was taken up with the local government reorganisation which saw Berkshire County Council abolished, and BRO start a new life as a joint service to the 6 Berkshire districts. Ten years on, it is easy to forget how disruptive this was. Many of the County Council's own more recent records had to be transferred, one by one, to the new councils. Much of the Office's staff time was invested in contributing to commemorative work or to changing systems for those of Reading Borough Council, who had agreed to take the new lead in managing the service. For visitors too, there was the disruption after 1 April 1998 when they found themselves visiting what was now the UK headquarters of Foster Wheeler, and no longer able to use the building as freely as before.

But local government reorganisation also delivered a big present - the promise of a new BRO from the Berkshire districts. A site was chosen in 1998 in the grounds of Yeomanry House, Reading, once known as Castle Hill House and owned by the Jesse family. Work began on the £5m building in 1999.

As some readers may recall, the completion of the new Record Office was delayed. When the searchroom at Shire Hall finally had to be surrendered to Foster Wheeler on 24 March 2000, a temporary one was established at Battle Library in West Reading until removals could begin. The new Office finally opened to the public on 3 October 2000, and was officially opened by the Princess Royal on 28 February 2001. Despite its difficult genesis, the present BRO has received many favourable comments, and continues to impress new visitors with its light and roomy research space.

This was also the time when external funding began to become available for more and more project work. The websites www.a2a.org.uk and www.berkshirenclosure.org.uk date from this period, as the creation of online content was seen as an increasingly important part of archive work. External funding continues to benefit access - BRO has recently completed

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the first part of its Broadmoor Hospital project, and has just begun work to revise the Phillimore index to Archdeaconry probate material 1508-1652.

The last few years has seen a shift of use, as researchers increasingly seek out online resources as a first step in their work. Visitors to the first BRO in 1948 would recognise the layout of our searchroom, but not the information opportunities available to us. Our surroundings have changed too - from a room within a building to a standalone and purpose-built facility. Instead of prisoners or ghosts, we now share our site with wedding parties, proud parents and their babies, and the Berkshire Family History Society's own Research Centre. We receive around 6,000 visitors each year, and have 7 miles of shelving in our strongrooms.

On 10 August 2008 we celebrated our 60th birthday, beginning our anniversary year. Today we are a joint service of Bracknell Forest, Reading, Slough, West Berkshire, Windsor and Maidenhead, and Wokingham councils. But our aim remains unchanged from 1948: to locate and preserve records relating to the county of Berkshire and its people, and to make them available for research to anyone who is interested in the county's past. We will carry this aim into the decades that come.

Mark Stevens, BRO

Sources:

BRO annual reports

Berkshire Family Historian summer 1981