

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 50

- ❖ [Berkshire boasts 3rd largest probate account collection](#)
- ❖ [Indexing project for Tudor & early Stuart records](#)
- ❖ [A complete index to 1858](#)
- ❖ [New to the Archives](#)

From the Editor

It may not come as a big surprise to learn that Berkshire's past is mostly populated by dead people. Indeed, historic documents relating to death and dying take up a sizable amount of space in our strongrooms. The rituals of our passing are of huge cultural and social importance, and over the years we had become aware of a key resource that we held, and which told us much about this. The main use of this resource is for family history - it is full of names, places, dates and data about extended families - and the existing indexes to it are piecemeal and of varying quality. It is our Archdeaconry of Berkshire probate collection.

So we decided to embark on a project to re-index all the probate documents we had received from the Archdeaconry court, which was the county's district probate registry until 1858. The articles in this edition of the Echo tell you more about our plans for the index; how we are doing so far; and some of the stories we have already found. It is a big project, but when it is complete it should give us not just an easier way into the collection, but also a much greater understanding of its content. Please keep an eye on the Echo and the BRO website for news about progress.

Of course the Echo is just one of the ways that we try and tell everyone about the work we are doing. Some of you might have seen the BRO cover article in Ancestors magazine for February, and by the time you are reading this we might also have met some of our readers at the annual Bracknell Family History Fair. Contributing to publications and events is an important part of what we do to promote historical research in Berkshire. We also continue to offer our programme of research evenings and introductory visits, as listed elsewhere on this page, in conjunction with our regular opening hours. If you know someone who still hasn't heard of us, please point them in this direction!



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

DAY SCHOOL: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

BRO's Mark Stevens will be speaking on Victorian Broadmoor as part of a day school on crime and criminal justice in the nineteenth century. Held in Oxford on Saturday 27 March, this course is run by the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education. To book a place, please telephone: (01865) 270360 or email: ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk.

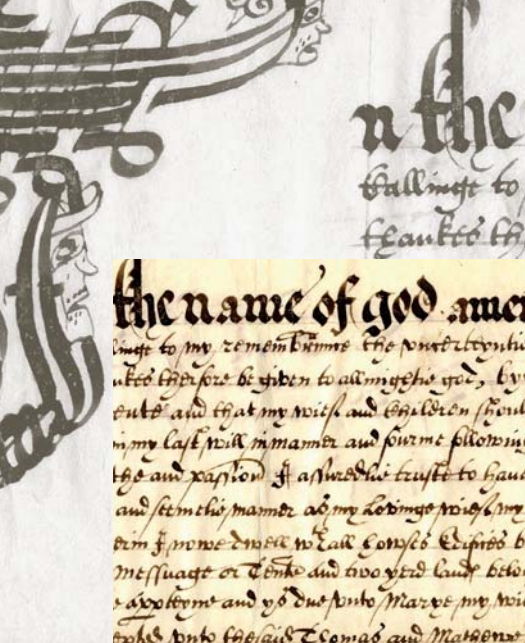
INTRODUCTORY VISITS

Just beginning your family or local history? Come along to one of our free introductory visits to see what's available here to help your research. The next dates are: 19 April, 12 July and 11 October. To book your place, telephone: (0118) 901-5132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

FREE RESEARCH EVENINGS

Experts from the Berkshire Family History Society will be on hand to help getting started in family history or with elusive ancestors at special open evenings at the Berkshire Record Office. Taking place from 6-8 pm, the next dates are 13 April and 13 July. No need to book: just turn up.





Berkshire Boasts 3rd Largest Probate Account Collection

Lives revealed

Many of the wills examined for the 1508-1652 index are by testators identifying themselves as husbandman or yeoman, but the documents are by no means uniform in content or form. The 1616 will of John Abeare, yeoman of Wargrave, written on parchment with an elaborate decorated initial [see image left], contains many details about the complicated division of his property and land (over 25 acres). The text also hints at a family dispute with the bequest to daughter Mary Lutman of forty shillings 'on condition that her husband shall not have any benefite therby nor chalinge any part therof'.

In the collection are examples of nuncupative, or spoken, wills, made in the presence of witnesses. These wills in the collection can provide vivid accounts of the deathbed scene and detail the mechanics of will-making. In 1625 Edward Cox, sick with the plague, stood by an upstairs window and dictated his will to the witnesses who stood in the street below. In 1591 Robert Chamberlain, being without speech, was asked three times to assert that his desire was for his estate to go to 'Ellen the maid which he was determined to marry,' which he did by squeezing the hands of one of the witnesses. If there is an admon with the will, it can sometimes provide new information on family members, parish or occupation of the testator. Inventories are occasionally very general, merely giving sums for 'apparel', 'plate' or 'cattle' for example, or they may be brief, particularly for poor testators. Many give a list of the full contents of the deceased's property.

Accounts itemise the cost of dying: how much was spent on coffins, hearse cloths or digging the grave. They may also include details of food and drink distributed to the poor or amongst family and friends at the funeral. Typically these are rather modest, but the 19 pages of Dame Mary Gardner's account (1642) detail the pounds of comfits and biscuits, macaroons, marzipan, dried fruit, 'green dry lettice' and forty dozen cakes amongst other delicacies served. All this was washed down with nine gallons of sack, over ten gallons of white wine and nearly twelve gallons of claret. The account includes the cost of the attendance on Dame Mary of a physician and a surgeon, the latter named as Mr Trapham. This was probably Thomas Trapham from Maidenhead, surgeon to Oliver Cromwell.

The wills also carry details useful for investigating local history, such as bequests to churches or charities and descriptions of estates, buildings or monuments. An annuity for the poor men of the John Isbury almshouses, Lambourn, was established by John Clifton in 1582, and in 1586 the school at Newbury received the gift of a Greek dictionary, a Virgil and a Socrates in Greek from local schoolmaster Robert Wright. The 1624 will of Frances Pretty of Cookham, who describes himself as a papermaker, could mean that the local paper-mill was established by this time. If this is so, it is 34 years earlier than previously noted.

Work to date

Indexing project for Tudor & early Stuart records

As part of an ongoing project to update the indexes for the Record Office's whole collection of probate documents, a new index has been created for the records dating 1508-1652. The Tudor and early Stuart probate documents from the Archdeaconry court of Berkshire include over 11,000 original wills (BRO ref: D/A1). Many of the wills are bundled together with their associated inventories (a list of the testator's goods at death), accounts (funeral expenses etc incurred by the person administering the will), or admons (court paper granting administration of the will to named person/s), and occasionally with all of these supplementary documents. There are also over 4,000 separate original admons and around 9,000 pages of wills and admons copied into the court registers. Most register entries are copies of the existing wills or admons, but some of the original documents no longer survive. It is a strong collection, with the third largest survival of probate accounts in the country, after Canterbury and Lincoln.



Berkshire Boasts 3rd Largest Probate Account Collection

	A	B	C	D	
	BRO ref	Date of will	Date of Probate	Surname (original spelling)	Alias
1					
2	D/A1/40/060	1577		Bowle	
3	D/A1/40/061	1571	1576	Bent	

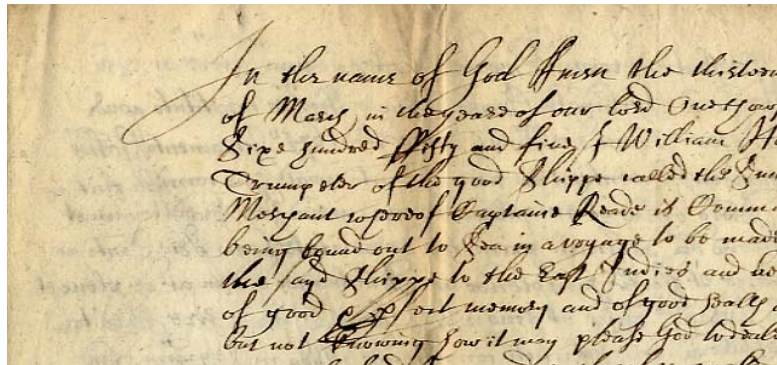
Probate index screen shot

The Index

The 1508-1652 index will eventually be available as a printed volume and electronic database. It will be searchable by the date of the will as well as the date of probate; the full name of the individual in both the original spelling and a modernised version where appropriate (eg. Haryson and Harrison); the testator's parish with the village, hamlet or street if stated; and the testator's occupation and status (eg. senior, junior, widow, gentleman etc.). The initial indexing work is nearly complete. Watch this space for an update once editing and publication preparations are finalised.

Future Plans A Complete Index to 1858

As the plans to index the early records come to fruition, what of the remainder of the probate collection, 1653-1858? Indexes exist, but that for 1653-1710 is out of print and that for 1711-1858 has never been published. Moreover, both needed to be checked for accuracy and completeness. We at BRO could not do this on our own, so with the support of the Berkshire and Oxfordshire Family History Societies and a team of volunteers, we have started working through the records. We meet once a fortnight in the Record Office. Bundles of originals are brought out, carefully unfolded, and details checked against the existing database.



Fortunately most of the later documents are relatively easy to read, though the work gets noticeably more challenging as you go back in time. However, by working together we are able to overcome the challenges, and enjoy the experience. The project is expected to take three to four years to complete – but the resulting index will be well worth the wait.

Glimpses of real people

Indexing is much more than a mechanical exercise. Although it is not possible to read every document right through, we get fascinating glimpses of real people from many different walks of life. Some wills are very careful and neat, others clearly had to be written on behalf of the testator, and some are barely literate. Thomas Sellwood of Kingston Bagpuize was a farmer of means – his inventory valued his goods, mainly livestock and farm equipment, at £75 – but he could not write, and had to sign with a mark.

Though household goods are commonly bequeathed, and many listed in detail,

sometimes possessions were explicitly not left. Philip Sayer, a clergyman of Stanford Dingley, left his books to his colleague the Revd Mr Land of Basildon, but added 'except my sermons, which I strictly require my servant Elizabeth Herbert to burn when and as soon as I am dead'.

Perhaps the prize for the most exotic will goes to William Horner, ship's trumpeter. In 1655 he was about to embark on a voyage to the East Indies on the good ship Smyrna Merchant, but being uncertain of such a potentially perilous adventure – as he put it 'not knowing how it may please God

to deal with me in the sayd voyage' – he made his will before he left. Fate seems to have been kind, for it was nearly twenty years before the will was proved, and before his good friend Mr John Ashenden, citizen and haberdasher of London, could claim his inheritance which, according to the inventory, included a silver trumpet valued at £6 3s, a brass trumpet with silver garnishings (£1), a gold and diamond ring, a small plain gold ring and a ten shilling piece of gold, together worth £2 10s, and two old calico quilts, worth £2.



New to the Archives



Parish registers

Compton: marriages, 1964-1983, and banns, 1955-1990 (the deposit also includes 19th century churchwardens' accounts and vestry minutes)(D/P41).

Reading Christ Church: marriages, 1984-1990 (also a rather attractive artist's impression of the proposed church before it was built, 1860s)(D/P170).

Reading Greyfriars: marriages, 2003-2009 (D/P163).

Reading Holy Trinity: baptisms, 1949-1975, and marriages, 1952-1970 (D/P171).

Sunningdale: banns, 1987-1998 (D/P150B).

Thatcham: baptisms, 1992-2004; marriages, 1992-1999; banns, 1976-1980, 1999-2005 (D/P130).

Warfield: marriages, 1981-2005; banns, 1975-1993 (D/P144).

School records

We have catalogued records from the following schools:

Streatley C of E School, 1873-2003 (D/EX2127).

Lambs Lane Council School, Swallowfield, 1908-1916 (SCH19).

Winkfield St Mary's Church of England School, 1943-2003 (SCH18).

Wills

Family historians inspired by the theme of this issue may also be interested in a large collection of wills received from a Reading solicitors' firm (D/EX1549). They cover the period 1857-1994, and are for clients from a wide area around the county and elsewhere.

Randall family papers

The papers of the Randall family of Thatcham, Newbury and elsewhere (D/EX2124) are an exceptionally interesting, if patchy, family collection going well beyond the Berkshire borders – including letters from a daughter teaching in Brussels (as the Bronte sisters did) in 1845; a mid 19th century nonconformist clergyman's wife writing of the difficulties facing the French Protestant cause, her niece, another Randall daughter, having married a French minister; and most exotically, a letter from a son who had set up as a doctor in the Gold Rush region of California in 1853.

Environmental study

A particularly charming arrival consists of some photographs of children at Redlands Infants' School in Reading engaged in nature study, c.1910-1911, and a book describing the work by their teacher, Miss Eliza Chattaway, published in 1912 (D/EX2134). She was obviously something of a pioneer in the teaching of science and environmental matters. In addition, if you want to find out what the weather was like on any given day, 1978-1992, you can find out from an Emmer Green man's meticulous daily weather readings (D/EX1993).

Wallingford Municipal Charities

The records of Wallingford Municipal Charities, 1628-1978, are of both local and family history interest (D/QWA). The charities included almshouses, apprenticeships for poor children, clothing, blankets and fuel for the elderly, dowries for maidservants, and even the maintenance of the bridge. A letter from the clerk of the similar Henley Municipal Charities, over the border in Oxfordshire, reports amusingly in 1922, 'We do find a difficulty in finding boys willing to be apprenticed to any other trade than that of an Engineer, an idea, which in my opinion, usually results from the somewhat erroneous fancy, that Engineers apprentices do nothing but ride motor bikes'.



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Opening Hours

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Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please call us for further details.

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