

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 54

- ❖ [In the bleak midwinter](#)
- ❖ [Fire and lightning](#)
- ❖ [Two floods in 18th century Purley](#)
- ❖ [High water at Windsor, 1947](#)
- ❖ [New to the Archives](#)

From the Editor

The weather is, of course, a national obsession. At BRO we have often come across stories from times past which illustrate that there is nothing new in this obsession. Nature never ceases to be remarkable, so our ancestors made sure they made a note of the remarkable, natural events that they experienced.

With the current concerns about global warming, and the possibility that it may eventually cause a major cooling, it is sobering to see the local experience of the 'Year Without Summer' that was caused by the eruption of Indonesian volcano, Mount Tambora, in 1816. Even in rural Berkshire, the largest volcanic explosion in recorded history was noticed, and the local people lost their crops to the weather.

Closer to home, residents of the county are more resigned to suffering the effects of the Thames or other rivers bursting their banks. This Echo includes a few examples from across the centuries to show that our predecessors suffered much the same discomforts that we might now. The beauty of our rivers can always be tempered by the disruption of a flood.

If this winter is as harsh as the last one, then the BRO will once again be able to provide a warm buffer against the cold. We are also very pleased to be able to support the reformed Reading WEA as it begins to deliver a new programme of lifelong learning. Happily, historical research always has a cosy, indoor option.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Introductory visits

Just getting started in 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: 14 February and 9 May. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 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: 8 February, 12 April and 12 July. No need to book: just turn up.

WEA course on archive and museum collections in Reading

BRO is joining up with a number of local museums and the WEA to run a course exploring the range and variety of their collections in a new weekly course entitled 'Exploring Reading's Museum Collections'. This begins on 19 January 2011 (2-4pm) and lasts for nine weeks, meeting at different venues each week, including a session at BRO on 16 March.





In the bleak midwinter



Fire and lightning

Extreme weather is not a new phenomenon. For instance, a recent discovery in the Reading Borough records is a receipt from February 1767 for money ordered to be paid to the poor 'in this severe season' in February 1767 (see R/FZ2). In February 1816 the Borough also paid for the 'cleaning of snow off the Town Hall and Church Walk'.

The winter of 1816 followed the major volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia, and is reflected in the Berkshire records. The incumbent of Hatford noted at the back of his parish register (D/P65/1/1) in 1839 that ever since 1816 the summers had been very wet, reminiscing that in 1816 the harvest was delayed 'until the winter had far advanced and much of the crop was quite spoiled'. The years 1836-1839 had seen exceptionally cold springs, with frost in May, with 1838 seeing the worst frosts at Christmas in a hundred years. 1837 and 1838 saw droughts, with the clergyman twice leading the parish in prayers for rain, after which 'abundant thunder-showers supplied our wants'.

Dramatic local incidents are also noted in our collections. For instance in around 1789 in Longcot, the incumbent or parish clerk made a note in the baptism register of lightning slitting an elm in a particular field (D/P112B/1/7).

In 1764 a fireball appeared in the home of Dr and Mrs Adams of Kingston Lisle (D/EZ124). Another fireball was seen at Sonning in 1840, by John Treacher, son of the Surveyor of the Thames Navigation (D/EX1457/8/1).

On 20 July 1757 the spire of Shottesbrooke parish church was struck by lightning. This exceptional event is recorded in the parish register (D/P111/1/1):

'About one o'clock at noon there happened a violent storm of thunder and lightning. The lightning broke into the spire, and threw out from it a great quantity of the stone work. It so shivered the whole spire, that at first it was thought that it must be taken down. It passed down to the north cross aisle, destroyed the wainscot of the gallery, tore the door and door-case passing into the gallery, to pieces; passed to the north window near the north porch, tore that window to pieces, and the wainscot of the pews under it, struck out one brick in the floor of the middle aisle, and burst out through the north porch. Some of the stone in the steeple was thrown out into Mr Vansittart's garden about 100 feet from the church. The roof was much shattered with the fall of the stone, the rafters were set on fire, but help being at hand the fire was soon extinguished, without any damage done to the woodwork of the roof. In consequence of this breach of the steeple, the church was shut up for more than a year, and the parishioners attended at White Waltham.'



Need somewhere to hold a meeting?

Why not ask about our Wroughton Room for hire? Reasonable rates, great accommodation. Call on **0118 901 5137** for more information.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Bracknell Family History Fair

This annual event is on Sunday 30 January at Bracknell Sport and Leisure Centre, Bagshot Road, Bracknell (admission £3).



Two floods in 18th century Purley

A very visual description of a Thames flood in February 1795 is preserved in a report written by George Reynolds (D/EX2066/1):

‘We have had the highest flood at Purley that has happened these one and twenty years. On Tuesday last the water rose very fast, and at night it wanted about five Inches upright of coming into the stable. I told the carter that I would venture the horses that night, for I did not think that there could be more than five or six inches in water before the morning; but to my surprise the next morning I found them almost up to their bellies in water, as the flood had risen almost two feet perpendicular. I obtained leave of Mr Johnson to put the three cart horses and the colt in his stable, and for the two saddle horses and the cow, I had a bit of ground hurdled off at the end of the kitchen garden, as that spot ... was all the dry ground on which we could put any thing. The timber on

the premises was floated, but by the help of the boat and the men we saved every stick. Nothing was lost. The flood continued rising till Thursday night, and then the water was three feet high in the stable. Since that time the water has continued sinking, as fast as it rose, and on Sunday, it was out of the stable, and this day, I shall have the horses brought home.’

The earlier flood alluded to is recorded in the parish register (D/P93/1/3), with a memorandum dated March 1774 of ‘the greatest flood in the River Thames remembered to have happened within the knowledge of the oldest inhabitants. The water ran into the church; which is an event of which there is no tradition ever to have happened before. The water in the church was ankle deep and continued there for several hours.’ Old parish churches were usually safe from floods as they were generally built on high ground.

High water at Windsor, 1947: disaster brings out the spirit of the nation

The early months of 1947 saw one of the worst winters the country has seen, with deep snow on the ground for two months. Disastrously, this period ended in the middle of March with a sudden thaw combined with heavy rainfall, while the ground was still frozen too hard to allow the water to permeate through the soil. An eyewitness in Windsor Great Park told borough officials the hills were ‘streaming with sheets of water’. A lot of this water ended up in the River Thames, which promptly burst its banks and flooded Windsor, Reading, and other places.

The ensuing panic is revealed in a detailed report by the Windsor Borough Engineer and Surveyor on his staff’s desperate attempts to prevent the flooding of parts of the town (D/EX1915/4/2). Their efforts faced particular difficulties as in this immediate post-war period, fuel was too short to allow the area to be fully lighted, and there were also shortages of equipment and labour – even when workmen, employed in building council houses and living in a camp in the Great Park, were recruited.

The town still had a number of horse-drawn cabs, which could make their way through flooded roads impassable for motor vehicles in the first day or so of the flood. Later, a large number of boats were brought in, some from as far away as Oxford. Boys and staff from Eton College volunteered to act as boatmen.



It was feared that the floods would engulf the waterworks, polluting the domestic water supply, so householders were asked to fill their baths with an emergency personal supply. Phones were out of order, and the army supplied radio transmitters for essential sites such as the River Street car park, which acted as the emergency headquarters). The Scots Guards blew up unsafe trees and obstructions on the banks of the river.

Schools and hospitals were used to accommodate both families forced from their homes, and servicemen and civilian volunteers helping tackle the flood. Local voluntary organisations also pitched in. Food was distributed centrally, and hot meals were delivered to those trapped in upstairs accommodation with no access to cooking facilities. Horlicks of Slough provided hot drinks free throughout the flooded area. No human beings were killed, but sadly, many pets drowned.

The flood lasted almost two weeks. The Town Clerk paid tribute afterwards to the cheerful attitude adopted by the people of Windsor, who ‘faced what was for many of them a catastrophe with amazing cheerfulness and courage. I saw the same spirit in the London air-raids, and I like to think that it is typical of our character as a nation’.



New to the Archives

Reading Borough finances uncovered

The accounts and other financial records of Reading borough, 1835-1975, and the Local Board of Health, 1850-1891, are now available for research (R/FB). They include, as well as the main series of general accounts, rent accounts of borough property, naming the tenants, 1835-1853, 1886-1891; accounts of Reading Tramways, 1901-1947, Reading Gas Company, 1904-1949; and staff superannuation registers, 1924-1986. We have also listed the accounts of Reading and Earley School Boards, 1871-1903 (R/FE1), and the borough Education Committee, 1903-1945, including registers of teachers, 1903-1939 (R/FE2). There are also accounts for some individual Reading schools, 1872-1910 (R/FE3).

Our ongoing project to complete the cataloguing of the older Reading borough records originally listed by the Historical Manuscripts Commission in the 19th century sees the completion of the following financial records:

- » Accounts of the Reading Improvement Commissioners, 1826-1846 (R/AS)
- » Additional chamberlains' accounts, 1822-1835 (R/FA3)
- » Quit rentals (money owed by property owners to the Corporation under the terms of the borough charter), 1611-1612, 1753-1801 (R/FA11)
- » Fee farm accounts (money paid annually by the Corporation to the Crown), 1567-1640 (R/FA12)
- » Constables' accounts, 1645-1646 (R/FA13)

In addition, a number of additional items relating to the borough's quarter sessions court, 1603-1777, have been discovered (R/JQ). Fascinating material includes prosecutions of William Sedberie, a shoemaker, for refusing to kneel at Holy Communion in 1603; a woman who had beaten her young apprentice black and blue in 1644; and a Bible reading meeting disrupted by a mob throwing stones through the windows in 1647. There is also a register of recognisances paid by licensed victuallers and innholders, 1607-1635. Family historians will be excited by a volume of poor law settlement examinations, 1768-1777.

Photographs

We have listed a set of lantern slides of Berkshire views from the 1920s or 1930s (D/EX2070). We have also acquired a photograph of Cholsey Railway Station, c.1890 (D/EX2146), and a small set of photographs of waterworks buildings in Reading, 1946-1948, including one showing men breaking ice at Fobney Pumping Station, Reading, in the famously harsh winter of 1946/1947 (D/EX2162) (pictured).

Maps and plans

A number of important maps have found their way to us recently, including two tithe maps, for the parishes of Brimpton (D/P26) and Yattendon (D/P159). There are also two enclosure maps. That for East Hagbourne is accompanied by its award (D/EZ78).



A copy made in 1867 of the enclosure map for Marsh Benham in Speen, originally drawn up in 1780 (D/EX2177), is of particular interest as it includes areas to the north and east which are missing from other versions of this map. We have also acquired plans of Bowers Farm, Letcombe Regis, 1915 (D/EX2178), and Alfred Waterhouse's estate in Yattendon, Hampstead Norreys and Frilsham in 1883 (D/P159).

New resources for house history

The building control and planning applications for Newbury Rural District, 1930-1967, have now been listed (RD/N/SB). Our ongoing project to make all surviving rating records available continues with the completion of catalogues of rate books and valuation lists for Newbury Borough, 1907-1962 (N/FR), and the addition of water rate books, 1876-1936, to the Slough collection (S/FR). An interesting small collection of papers of the Hayward family of Frilford and elsewhere, 1657-1875, includes a number of deeds for north Berkshire parishes (D/EZ22). We have also catalogued deeds of Purley manor and the Purley Park estate, 1677-1913 (D/EZ25); and property in Ashbury and Little Coxwell (including Idstone capital messuage), 1610-1768 (D/EX138); and Maidenhead, 1819-1826 (D/EX136).

Parish registers

Watchfield: burials, 1861-1990; banns, 1858-2004.

Opening Hours

Tues 9-5, Weds 9-5, Thurs 9-9pm, Fri 9-4.30.
Closed Mondays, Weekends and Bank Holidays.
Please call us for further details.

Contact Information:

Tel: 0118 937 5132 Fax: 0118 937 5131
Web: www.berkshirerecordoffice.gov.uk
Email: arch@reading.gov.uk

The Berkshire Record Office,
9 Coley Avenue, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 6AF

Funding Partners

- » Bracknell Forest Council
- » Reading Borough Council
- » Slough Borough Council
- » West Berkshire Council
- » The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- » Wokingham Borough Council

