

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 61

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From the Editor

Do you fancy trying your hand at law and order in Victorian Berkshire? This edition of the Echo gives you a chance to see how crime and punishment were managed one hundred and fifty years ago.

One of the first things that might strike you is how little has changed: how there is still a debate about to what extent prison should punish and rehabilitate; how there is still a question as to whether social contexts influence judgement; how horrible acts have always been committed.

The latter is something that I am constantly harping on about when I talk to groups about Victorian crime. You may sometimes be forgiven for believing that all ills are modern in origin, and that if you peep through the curtains of history you will see only good. Of course it has never been so, and the Victorians experienced just as many – if not more – unpleasant things as we do today. This doesn't make me feel any better about current crimes, but I do realise that not only are they

nothing new they are also, fortunately, incredibly rare. So as I introduce this Echo, I feel a bit like Nick Ross on Crimewatch – please, don't have nightmares.

It's quite nice to balance the nasty bits of history with some more positive personal stories, and you can find these in the glut of diaries that we have recently acquired. Diarists are very variable people: some create lists, while others attempt to open windows onto everybody's soul. Generally speaking archivists prefer the latter and will want to keep only examples of the former to give a flavour for a type of life.

What any diary will do is provide you with the chance of creating a document of historical value. It is a very egalitarian form of record. If you feel that history is only the voice of the great and the good (and the criminals) then why not take up your own diary? You never know: if it's good enough, one day it may be you who is New to the Archives.



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 22 October 2012, and 11 February, 10 June and 7 October 2013, all at 2 p.m. telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

Enclosure records day school

The County Archivist is leading a day school on enclosure records on Saturday 24 November (cost £52 per person). Places are limited to 20, so early booking is advised. Enrol online at www.conted.ox.ac.uk/V200-57.





Reforming prisoners: Reading leads the way

In the middle of the 19th century, Reading was at the forefront of a radical new approach to treating prisoners with the aim of rehabilitation rather than retribution. It was based on providing time for moral reflection. From 1846 prisoners in Reading Gaol were spared the hard labour customary at the time, instead being kept in solitary confinement. This allowed what the justices described as ‘the unremitting inculcation of sound religious instruction conveying ... lasting motives for right conduct, with only as much ordinary labour or exercise as might be a needful relief to minds not used to mental fatigue.’

The plan was in part to counter many prisoners’ lack of formal education. A third of prisoners at this time were totally illiterate, and fewer than 2% had attended an elementary school for four years. The Revd John Field, Reading Prison’s chaplain, deplored the fact that a quarter of them were ‘unacquainted with the simplest truths of holy religion; ignorant of the Saviour’s name, and unable to repeat the prayer he taught’. The bad atmosphere to be found in public houses had led many into bad ways, but the principal cause he ascribed to criminal behaviour was poor parenting. Field regretted the lack of an alternative to the adult gaol for naughty youngsters who had fallen foul of the criminal system but who were guilty of little more than mischief. He also thought parents, some of who had actually sent a child out to steal, should be charged for the child’s board and lodging while incarcerated.

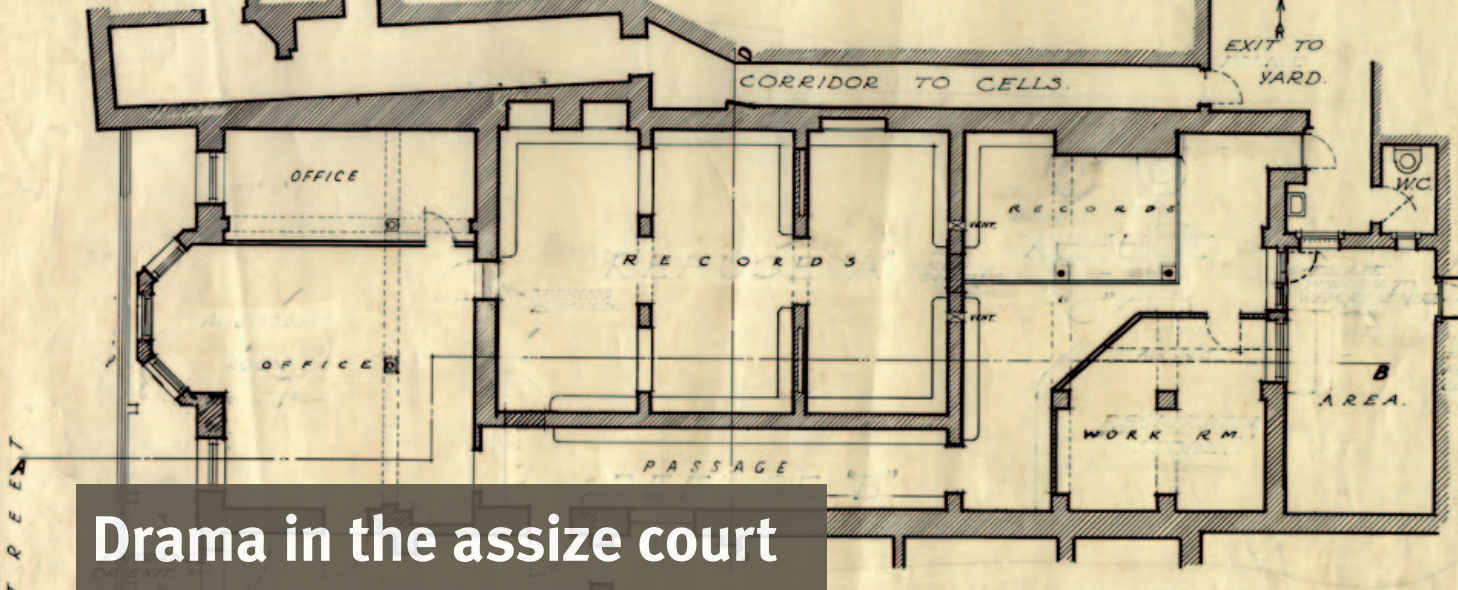
The magistrates believed their new system was more effective and long lasting than any other method for rehabilitating prisoners. They credited it with a reduction of serious crime in Berkshire, and found that the improvement in individuals endured even when they moved on. 14 out of the 19 convicts transferred from Reading to the harsher environment of Portland Island had ‘steadily adhered to’ their new principles, ‘even under such an ordeal as compulsory association with a convict multitude chiefly of the worst characters’. These were prisoners who had themselves, on arriving at Reading, been described in terms such as ‘perfectly lost’ and ‘thoroughly depraved in all respects’.

The chaplain reported that the programme had led to similar improvements in the behaviour of the prison staff: ‘Under former plans, whilst the subjects of their charge were treated as brutes, they themselves were debased – the turnkey of past days was the mere tool of punishment and his character sunk to his condition; now that the prison warders were agents in the correction of offenders their conduct was exemplary’.

Despite its success, however, the humane Reading system was disliked by those who thought convicts should be put to work as part of the proper punishment they deserved. Within a few years, the government had forced Berkshire to drop it and return to punitive treatment and hard labour for all.

Above: John Davis, a prisoner in Reading Gaol in 1887





Drama in the assize court

BRO is fortunate enough to hold the notes taken by Reading-born judge Thomas Noon Talfourd of all the cases he heard across the country in the 1850s (D/EX1410). Read the cases below, and see whether you could be a Victorian judge:

In February and March 1851, Talfourd was at the Berkshire Assizes in Abingdon, hearing the story of a riot. In the dock were William Mitchell, Thomas Lloyd and Thomas Wilkins, fighters at an illegal prize fight held in a secluded spot in the parish of White Waltham; Thomas Goodchild and John Smith, involved in the staging of the fights; and Edward Scott, who provided brandy to men in the makeshift ring. All were accused of riot.

Bury Doyne, a local landowner and magistrate, got wind of the event, and went to the scene with two constables, where they found a crowd of nearly 1500 men. This crowd objected strongly to the arrival of the authorities and Mr Doyne testified that on his demanding the fight be stopped, he was assaulted by the mob with sticks. Charles Vansittart, the vicar of White Waltham, also gave evidence to this effect. The verdict? The men were found guilty.

Two years later, Talfourd was back at the Berkshire Assizes and this time he heard some particularly tragic cases. Two single women, Ann Slaughter of Windsor, and Ann Good of Wallingford, were both accused of murdering their newborn babies.

Eliza Winchester, a neighbour of the Slaughters, testified that she had been shocked to find the body of an infant stuffed down the privy attached to her house. Thomas Barton, a surgeon, told the court that the baby was a girl, had been born alive, and had been dead not more than two days. There were bruises on the baby's head, the cord was not tied (suggesting no medical attendance at the birth), and he gave the cause of death as suffocation. He had seen Slaughter

nursing another baby earlier that day, a hundred yards from the privy, and immediately went there to ask if she had had a child. She denied it, but on examination, the doctor confirmed that she had recently given birth.

Her mother was horrified, asking her daughter, "How could you get us into this trouble?" Ann then confessed, "I did it all myself". She said she was kneeling beside the bed when she suddenly went into labour, the baby "fell from me to the floor and squeaked once", but was dead when she picked her up. She then wrapped up the body in her shawl, and put it in the privy. The jury believed her story, and found her not guilty of murder, but guilty of concealing a birth.

Ann Good was a servant who repeatedly denied her pregnancy to her suspicious employer, Sarah Winnell – even when a doctor informed Mrs Winnell of it. She finally admitted, after giving birth secretly in her attic bedroom, that she had taken some pills 'that had freed nature'. Another doctor was called in, and he found the baby's body in the attic, still warm and covered in blood. Ann had cut off the baby's head with a table knife, which must have taken considerable effort, and then calmly gone downstairs. The doctor testified that 'delirium' was not uncommon in women who had just given birth, and a second doctor who saw Ann later found her out of her senses, as well as suffering from severe bleeding following the birth.

Both doctors thought the baby likely to have been born alive and healthy, and to have been an hour or two old when it was killed. She confessed to a woman called in to care for her, "The child was dead, and I cut off its head". This looked like deliberate murder. However, Ann made no attempt to hide the body or the knife, and the jury decided to acquit her on the grounds of insanity.



New to the Archives

Diaries

We have recently acquired quite a number of diaries, of varying degrees of interest. The most moving are four diaries kept by Helen Williams (later Gegg) of East Ilsley, 1842-1846 (D/EX2274). They include references to her courtship with her 'dearest Peesley' (local farmer John Peesley Gegg), and after their marriage to a stillbirth and miscarriage. Helen died childless in 1850, aged just 28. Touchingly, when her grieving husband eventually remarried, over a decade later, he chose to remember Helen by naming his eldest daughter after her.

Others were kept by Vere Langford Oliver of Sunningdale, a noted genealogist, his wife Celia and sister Ethel (lady in waiting to the Princess of Monaco), 1884-1891 (D/EX2262). The long series of diaries of William Richard Mortimer Thoyts of Sulhamstead, 1857-1908, relate almost exclusively to his hunting activities (D/EX2273). We also have a summarised version only of the 1930s diaries of Lt General Edward Stotherd of Winkfield (D/EZ171).

Magic, music and medicine

The fascinating memoir of William Savory of Brightwalton, composed in 1792, has been transferred here from Reading Library (D/EX2275). The book includes reminiscences of William's childhood and the colourful characters he encountered, including a woman who claimed to be a witch, as well as local schoolmasters and practitioners of medicine. William's family were wheelwrights with a sideline in semi-professional medicine, and he himself trained as an apothecary in Newbury and then as a doctor in London before returning home. His interests included magic (with several charms recorded in the book), astrology, and music, and his memoir contains a wealth of detail of life in west Berkshire in the late 18th century.

In sickness and in death

The records of the Windsor Borough coroner, including the surviving case papers, 1910-1918, have now been listed (WI/JQ). Some additional material has been added to the records of Newbury District Hospital, 1930-1977 (D/H4).



Shinfield Lodge, 1904 (D/EX1786/6/6)

War and peace

An unusual item is the declaration by John Fuller of Blewbury of his loyalty to the Commonwealth, 1650 (D/EX2213). An album contains photographs of convalescent soldiers at Ascot War Hospital during the First World War (D/EX2243). The records of Newbury Twin Town Association, 1963-2009, meanwhile, reflect local people's growing interest in more recent times in peaceful links with our European neighbours (D/EX2212).

Enclosure

We have been excited by the arrival of several enclosure maps and related records. There are maps and awards for Burghfield, 1853 (CPC29); Harwell, 1804 (CPC64); and Wash Common, Newbury, 1855-1858 (N/AP5/3). In addition, the working papers of surveyor Decimus Godson relating to the enclosure of Sandhurst, 1815-1818 have been transferred here (D/EX2269). Material relating to several small enclosures in Shinfield, 1808-1856, is also to be found in the newly catalogued archive of the Cobham family of Shinfield Place, 1562-1939 (D/EX1786), which has much else of interest for historians of Shinfield.

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.

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