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From the Editor

Paying your rates was a staple of local taxation from Tudor times until 1990. Rates started out as being a specific collection for a specific purpose: roads first, then poor relief. Town improvements were paid for out of the rates, such as paving, street lighting or drains and sewers, before education became the great Victorian addition to public services paid for from a local pot.

It's interesting to wonder whether taxation is more bearable if it is subject-specific. Did the Tudors and the Stuarts find it easier to collect money on the basis that the poor rate would benefit the poor? Was it easier for the Victorians to collect the school rate when it funded only schools?

That's not to say that the rates were paid willingly and without question in days gone by, and in the pages of this Echo you will find various characters who resented paying individual sums towards community benefits. Local taxation has always been unpopular and there seems little reason to suppose that view will ever change.



Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist

Eventually, of course, the system of rates was simplified. The inefficiencies of a number of different bodies – parishes, councils, poor law unions and school boards - collecting a number of different rates was reformed. The general rate was created.

The basic construct of its rateable value, placed on each property, survives today. Council tax makes use of bands rather than individual valuations, but local taxation is still based on land and buildings rather than anything else. A Tudor rate collector would notice many changes on the streets of Berkshire, but he would still recognise the way we pay for local services.

The hundreds of rate books in our possession illustrate some of those many changes. They form a record of the growth of Berkshire, both in terms of buildings and people as well as economically. They also form a record of the collective pain when each instalment of the rates fell due. As this year's council tax bill drops through your letterbox, spare a thought for all those over the centuries who have let out the same sigh of resignation.

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 10 June and 7 October, both at 2 p.m. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: arch@reading.gov.uk.

Enemies of the State

We're currently working with the University of Reading's English Literature Department on a project about the Easter Rising of 1916. A number of Irish internees ended up in Reading Prison, and the project will tell their story. We'll have an evening of talks on Tuesday 30 April (booking required) and a small exhibition in the Wroughton Room from May to August.

Schools project

Would you like to join our volunteers creating a guide to 18th century schools in Berkshire? Come along to BRO on Wednesday 8 May at 2.30 p.m. to find out more.





Bridge to nowhere

For generations, the people of Cookham could reach the Buckinghamshire side of the River Thames only by ferry, or by travelling down to Maidenhead. That all ended in 1844 when the first Cookham Bridge was built - by a private company established by act of parliament, which allowed the bridge's owners to collect a toll from passengers to pay for the costs of construction and maintenance. That first bridge was a wooden one, replaced a generation later by a sturdier iron construction.

As time went on paying the tolls became increasingly unpopular. As early as 1899 there was pressure for the bridge to be taken over by Berkshire and Buckinghamshire County Councils, and serious negotiations to that effect foundered on several occasions. The 20th century brought increased resentment, particularly as more people travelled by car, and the company's records are full of letters of complaint (BR/C10/3, 19), attacking the tolls using such terms as 'absolutely preposterous'. One couple in 1903 complained of being charged double the cost for a single bicycle because they were riding a tandem. Some passengers were so annoyed they came to blows with the toll collector, and he was accused of rudeness to customers and failing to give receipts.

People preferred to go the long way round rather than pay up. In 1934 the company's own solicitor, Mr H Pinder-Brown, had 'no doubt whatever that there is a very definite boycott of Cookham Bridge', orchestrated by the Ratepayers' Association for Bourne End and Wooburn on the Buckinghamshire side.

Some regular travellers, and commercial organisations, managed to negotiate discounts. In 1936 W Lancaster-Cooper of Chelwood Court, Bourne End, offered a lump annual sum of £6 in lieu of the £35 he estimated it would cost him to pay the toll each time crossing the bridge four times a day. The directors compromised on £10 to cover Mr Lancaster-Cooper's two cars for a year, and allowed a single-car owner a £5 fee in lieu of tolls. Local businesses like the Summerleaze Gravel Co, Wethered's Brewery, and the Windsorian coach company also got reduced rates.

Charities and, later war workers, were outraged at being charged at all. The Bourne End Division of St John's Ambulance Brigade had to pay in order to attend road traffic accidents on the other side, and requested free passage in 1937. After the war started, the Blood Transfusion Service and some nurses in uniform were also granted free passage, but this caused resentment among others not given this privilege. Fire engines were not charged if attending a fire, but did have to pay at other times. The armed forces (including the Home Guard) were exempted from all such tolls by statute, but what of off-duty officers – especially when travelling with female companions? The toll collector was instructed to collect the toll in such cases, resulting in a heated incident in November 1941.

Lieutenant Barnes, travelling, he claimed, on military business in his own car due to a shortage of official vehicles, had 'given a lady a lift'. He was asked to pay the toll. He later suggested sarcastically that he should have asked his passenger to get out and walk across, and demanded he should get a refund of the shilling he had been forced to pay. The bridge solicitor thought the toll was paid correctly, and 'a stand must be made somewhere'. He suggested that evidence of actually being on official duty would be 'most helpful' when officers were using their own cars, particularly with passengers, and wrote to Barnes saying urbane, 'while not for one moment questioning your statement, the fact that the lady to whom you were giving a lift was in your car on both occasions when you passed over the bridge rather justifies the toll collector's action'.

Eventually, in 1947, the pressure of people power triumphed, and Berkshire and Buckinghamshire County Councils purchased the bridge. If that meant the cost of upkeep was merely transferred to ratepayers, no-one cared. Henceforward, passage from Cookham to the other side would be free.





(right) Staff at Reading Borough Council writing up the rate books, 1935 (D/EX2092/1)
 (left) Reading ratepayers queuing up to pay their rates in 1935 (D/EX2092/1)

The ratepayer's revenge

In the 1640s Adam Denton of Reading was so annoyed at being levied poor rates he actually locked the overseers in his house for several hours when they came to collect the overdue money (R/JQ1/28). Richard Stevens, Richard Seely, Edward Stroud and William Tanner reported him to the borough quarter sessions court.

Denton was a wealthy man, described as a gentleman, which means he had no need to work, and clearly had little sympathy for the paupers his contributions would have gone towards. He was probably fined for his action, though the court records are missing for this date.

Defaulting cleric in the dock

It was not only laymen who objected to paying their rates. The Newbury parish vestry minutes (D/P89/8/3) reveal the consequences when Dr Hibbert Binney, rector of Newbury, refused to pay. He owed £21 17s 6d from the poor rate levied in July 1840, and quarter sessions issued a warrant against his goods to pay the outstanding sum, which was

the equivalent of sending in the bailiffs.

The churchwardens and overseers of Newbury called a public vestry meeting to discuss this shocking incident on 14 October 1840. The ratepayers duly met at the church gate, to find Binney preventing them from entering the church, where vestry meetings

'Wasteful' spending or subsidised rates?

The people of Windsor were up in arms in the 1780s, when they felt the rates they paid for the poor and the upkeep of the parish church had been kept artificially high.

For most of the 18th century the borough had subsidised the rates, but they stopped doing this in 1771. In 1787 the churchwardens entered into a pamphlet war with the borough, each side issuing aggrieved printed handbills stating their case. The churchwardens claimed that for the past 16 years the borough had 'shamefully spent' the subsidy 'in dissipation and waste, to the great prejudice of the inhabitants in general', rather than helping out the ratepayers as they had done previously. The borough, on the other hand, affirmed that it was their money and they could spend it as they chose (WI/D201/4).

were normally held. He claimed that the meeting was 'altogether lawless', and demanded the crowd disperse. Robert Fuller Graham, a local lawyer, reminded the rector that those who had refused to pay their rates could not vote in a vestry meeting. Binney was removed from his position as chair.

The meeting was then adjourned to the Mansion House, where it was agreed to indemnify the justices in full for the costs of prosecuting Binney. The rector won in the end: Binney successfully appealed against the original rate in October (N/JQ/1/5), and the scandal was over.

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New to the Archives

The rate books project completed

Our rate books project has at last reached its conclusion, with the completion of work on records inherited by Reading and Maidenhead District Valuation Offices in the 1950s (P/DVO7-8). They comprise valuation lists for parishes in Cookham Rural District, 1902-1955; Easthampstead Rural District, 1950-1955; Windsor Rural District, 1895-1956; Slough Urban District, 1929-1955; Maidenhead Borough, 1902-1955; and Windsor Borough, 1924-1956; Newbury Borough and Hungerford, Newbury and Wantage Rural Districts, c.1932-1950; and the unusual survival of the valuers' working notebooks for Reading Borough, c.1931-1950. There are also minutes of the Assessment Committees for Windsor and Wokingham Areas. These discussed appeals against rating valuations.

Additional valuation lists have been discovered for Reading, 1956-1975 (R/FR). Rate books and accounts from Wokingham Borough Council, 1862-1974 (WO/FR) and Wokingham Rural Sanitary Authority, 1876-1880 (RS/WO) have been catalogued. Valuation lists for Upton-cum-Chalvey and Slough, 1851-1928, have been deposited, along with the minutes of Upton-cum-Chalvey Parish Council, 1894-1900, and some rather fragile maps showing the changing Slough borough boundaries, 1886-1929 (S/). Newly deposited records from Basildon Parish Council include rate books and valuation lists, 1840-1896 (CPC14). A handlist of rating records is now available in the searchroom and on our website.

Spotlight on Windsor

A large number of documents collected over the years by Windsor Borough and ranging from the 16th century to the 20th are now available for research (WI/D). Highlights of this varied collection include records of the Windsor Local Committee for Higher Education (WI/D8); the Royal Albert Institute and predecessors including the Windsor Literary and Scientific Institution, 1836-1925 (WI/D27); Windsor Volunteer Fire Brigade, 1851-1941 (WI/D96); Windsor and Eton Choral Society, 1837-1932 (WI/D184); Berkshire Local Pension Committee Windsor Rural District Sub-committee, 1923-1935 (WI/D233); Princess Christian's Training College and Nursery, 1953-1971 (WI/D271-272); and a number of deeds and printed items, mostly relating to Windsor and Eton. Photographs include some showing the construction of the Royal Mausoleum at Frogmore in the 1860s.

Architectural drawings

The records of the Reading building firm Owen Phillips (later A J Davis & Son) cover the period 1886-1968 (D/EX2197). The bulk of the collection comprises plans for buildings erected in Caversham, Earley and East Reading between the 1880s and the 1930s, with some later plans for the Christchurch Road area. Other newly deposited architect's plans relate to



proposed new municipal buildings in Newbury, 1908 (D/EX2233); private houses in Newbury, 1900s-1910s; Huntley, Boorne & Stevens' packaging factory in Reading, 1877-1927 (D/EX2194); and the conversion of mansion Benham Park, Speen, into offices, 1983 (D/EX2292).

Drama heritage

Berkshire is known for its acting talent, with modern luminaries like Kenneth Branagh and Kate Winslet hailing from the county, and records of a number of local theatre groups have recently been added to our collections. One of the most active is Wokingham Theatre, established in 1947, which puts on 10 or more productions a year (D/EX2083). We have also acquired records of Maidenhead Drama Festival, 1948-1970 (D/EX2250). A small collection of papers from the Few family of Caversham contains interesting material on amateur drama in Reading from the 1920s to the 1950s (D/EX2151), while another collection relates mainly to Newbury Operatic Society (D/EX2284). We have also listed records of the Bracknell Film Society, 1959-2000 (D/EX2126), a group which focussed on appreciation of the more artistic side of cinema.

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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Funding Partners

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