

# BRO

The Berkshire Record Office  
The Archives of the Royal County

April 2016

## The Berkshire Echo

### From the Editor

Welcome to the April 2016 edition of the Berkshire Echo. This issue has been constructed to coincide with the centenary of the Easter Rising of 1916. During the nineteenth century opposition to British rule in Ireland had been increasingly active. Eventually a rising took place on 24th April 1916 and over the course of a few days, around 450 people were killed and more than 2,000 wounded. The Rising may have been crushed within a week, but its impact ultimately resulted in the creation of the Irish Free State after the First World War. As we read in 'Traitors All' Berkshire residents were shocked by what was going on in Ireland and subsequently quite relieved when it was all over.

In July 1916, Reading Prison received a group of 37 men who had been involved (either directly or indirectly) in the Easter Rising. These Irish men were interned without trial under the terms of the 1914 Defence of the Realm Act. They were housed with the 'aliens' - foreign nationals who were suspected of spying and/or having anti-British sympathies. The article 'Pea soup' provides more detail on the Rising and we discover that the internees were rather fed up of the quality of food – pea soup in particular.

If you would like to find out more about the Easter Rising, why not come along to our exhibition which begins on 27th April 2016 (see the 'Dates for your diary' for full details).

If you're interested in how to read sixteenth and seventeenth century handwriting, why not try the one-day workshop led by academics from the University of Oxford. They will be at the BRO for two separate sessions and because the Oxford Research Centre for the Humanities and the Arts and Humanities Research Council are supporting it, it is absolutely free! Details under 'Dates for your diary'.

Lastly, don't forget to look at what's new to the archive in this edition. There are the latest parish registers, records of a local chemist as well as some theatre programmes. There is even a link to the main feature of this Echo in terms of internment through papers referring to Albert Cusden's time in Ruhleben, an internment camp in Germany, during the First World War.

Ivone Turnbull  
Senior Archivist

- Pea soup and step-dancing: Irish internees in Reading
- 'Traitors all': the Easter Rising seen from Berkshire
- New to the Archives

### DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

#### Universities of Revolution

From 27th April 2016, the BRO will host an exhibition to mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. This free exhibition will relate to the internment of Irishmen in Reading Gaol. Available during our opening hours (Tuesday and Wednesday 9am to 5pm, Thursday 9am to 9pm and Friday 9am to 4.30pm). Why not come along and take a look?

#### Introduction to reading 16th and 17th century handwriting

A one-day workshop led by young academics from the University of Oxford will provide an introduction to some of the different varieties of handwriting found in historical texts from the BRO dating from 1500 to 1700. Attendance is free, but places are limited to 12 per session. The workshop will run from 10.30 to 15.30 and there are two dates available to choose from:

Monday 16th May & 23rd May 2016

Booking is essential via email:  
arch@reading.gov.uk or by  
calling 0118 937 5132.





Top: Artists and musicians clash in internment – as seen by Albert Cusden (D/EX1485/4/1/3)  
Left: Darrell Figgis and Arthur Griffith

## Pea soup and step-dancing: Irish internees in Reading

Those directly involved in planning and leading the Rising were almost all executed, but many sympathisers were subjected to internment without trial. The majority were sent to prisons on the British mainland – including Reading. Reading Prison was already being used as a secure Place of Internment for foreign men thought to be a threat to national security during World War I – citizens of both enemy nations such as Germany, but also some from neutral countries like Spain, and even allies like Belgium and Russia in some cases. One of the most prominent of the Irish prisoners sent to Reading was Arthur Griffith (1872-1922), founder of the nationalist party Sinn Fein (which was not actually involved in the Rising).



The first group of 13 Irish internees arrived at Reading on 11 July 1916 from Frongoch Camp in Wales, and they were joined by many others in the ensuing months. They were held separately from the other

interned aliens, in the women's block of the prison, and treated differently. Playwright and gunrunner Darrell Figgis (1882-1925) spearheaded the fight for better treatment with the help of a set of law text books. He managed to get the lights out time changed from 8 to 10 pm, an increase in visiting and letter allowances, and an increase in wages paid to internees for cleaning in the prison, so that they could buy better meals from the canteen. Food was a big issue, with

complaints made to the Prison Inspectors in November 1916 about 'having pease soup twice a week & pease pudding once a week', although parcels from home could supplement the rations. The governor commented later that on the whole they 'gave little trouble, preferring to pose as martyrs'. Most of the first tranche of prisoners were released at Christmas 1916.

Some Irishmen remained, and in January 1918 the prison steward, Matthew Loan, complained that their constant partying was disturbing him in his quarters next to the Female Wing: 'The Irish prisoners give us little peace and quiet between 7 pm and 10. There was shouting and cheering, drilling, chorus singing, violin and flute playing with step-dancing, besides much walking and running up and down stairs, all of which we hear evenings most plainly and which disturbed the peace and quiet I ought to have enjoyed after my trying day's due.'

Another large group of Irish prisoners arrived in April 1918, including William Cosgrave, an active participant in the Easter Rising who had been elected a Sinn Fein MP at a by-election in 1917 while in custody. These men were more deeply implicated in the Rising, and some had been involved in a mutiny at Lewes Prison, so it was feared that they would be more resistant to prison authority. The governor complained that the men 'are a pretty objectionable set, different in many ways from those I had in 1916, and comprise the leaders of hunger strikes and smashers up in other prisons'. A military guard was installed, and a new, harsher regime imposed.



## Pea soup and step-dancing: Irish internees in Reading continued...

The government wanted them to be fed a standard prison diet rather than the more generous one offered to alien internees. Reading Prison Governor C M Morgan pointed out that 'it will mean cooking separate dinners over the gas stove for these six men. Also as the items for various days are different to those on the approved list for the Aliens at present interned, it will necessitate buying fish locally instead of from Grimsby for these men.' So the Irish prisoners in Reading were allowed better food after all, including a daily allowance of tea or coffee at breakfast.

Internees were permitted free time out of their cells all day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., but not at first allowed any letters, parcels or visits. When correspondence privileges were restored, this was subject to strict censorship. Parcels of clothing and butter were carefully checked, and there was a fear that the prisoners would hide messages in empty egg cartons. Other internees complained that the Irishmen got better treatment, for instance that their lights-out was half an hour later.

The menu in 1918 consisted of:

**Breakfast** – 6 oz bread, 1 pint porridge, ¼ oz margarine, 1 pint coffee.

**Dinner** – 2 oz bread, 1 ½ oz salt pork, 4 oz haricot beans, 16 oz potatoes, 4 oz stewed rhubarb (fresh), 4 oz leeks (from garden).

**Supper** – 5 oz bread, 1 pint cocoa, ¼ oz margarine, 6 oz potatoes, 1 ½ oz salt pork (alternatively with cheese).

Many of the Irishmen who had been interned in Reading went on to play their part in the establishment of an independent Ireland – including Arthur Griffith, who became President of the Irish Dail.

Sources: P/RP1/1/9; 1/8/2/1; 1/12/1

### World War I blog

The blog continues to grow on a daily basis. Each post relates to that day or month 100 years earlier, as the war unfolds before Berkshire eyes. It also includes local opinion on the events in Ireland and illuminating details from the prison records relating to the Irish internees. Check it out at <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com>



## 'Traitors all': the Easter Rising seen from Berkshire

Florence Vansittart Neale, who lived at Bisham Abbey with her husband and daughters, was among those shocked by the news from Ireland. She was predisposed to distrust the Irish nationalists, as the previous summer she had 'heard that we cannot have conscription because of the Irish. They are full of rebellion. Traitors all.' However, she probably did not expect an actual rebellion. Her avid interest in the story is shown in repeated entries in her diary (D/EX73/3/17/8).

On 24 April 1916 she wrote, 'Sir Roger Casement! arriving on Irish coast, German ship with ammunition! He taken. Germans scuttled ship.' Casement's involvement was a particular shock, as he was a distinguished former civil servant. The following day she noted that the 'Evening papers [were] full of interest [on the] Dublin rising "Sinn Feins". P.O. seized.'

The upper class circles in which Florence mixed fiercely criticised Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, and 'hope he will retire'. Florence was delighted when he did so soon afterwards. She noted the imposition of martial law in Ireland on 27 April, and on the 28th wrote, 'Dublin still going on. PO got out of rebels' hands (good)'. The following day, as fighting continued, she had heard rumours of '40 officers taken by rebels as hostages! 700 casualties'.

By the end of April she – together with many others on the British mainland - was relieved to see the revolt subsiding.

### Need somewhere to hold a meeting?

Why not ask about our Wroughton Room for hire? Reasonable rates, great accommodation. Call on **0118 937 5132** for more information.



Sackville Street in Dublin in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, 1916 (Public Domain)



# New to the Archives

## Personal papers

A catalogue is now available for part of the personal papers of Phoebe Cusden (D/EX1485), who as mayor of Reading was responsible for setting up the Reading-Dusseldorf Association in 1947. They relate mainly to her family, the Blackalls, and to her husband Albert Cusden's time in Ruhleben, an internment camp in Germany, during the First World War. Albert and three of his brothers, all from Reading, had been teaching English in Germany before the war.



LINING UP FOR HOT WATER.

The newly catalogued papers of local architect Conrad Willcocks (D/EWK) were highlighted in the last issue of the Echo. As well as plans and papers for all his architectural projects, they include the records of the Berkshire Local History Recording Scheme; the Berkshire Architectural Records Committee; and Reading and District Civic Society.

## New for family history

The following modern parish registers are now available here:

- ...✦ Bracknell Holy Trinity: burials, 1960-1973 (D/P165)
- ...✦ Brightwalton: baptisms, 1960-2014 (D/P24); burials, 1959-2014 (D/P24)
- ...✦ Clewer: marriages, 1990-2011 (D/P39)
- ...✦ Stratfield Mortimer: baptisms, 1968-1995; marriages, 1989-2010 (D/P120)
- ...✦ Welford: baptisms, 1949-2014; marriages, 1983-1989; burials, 1900-2013 (D/P147)

## Other places of worship

White Eagle Lodge was a registered place of worship for a spiritual organisation founded in the 1930s by a medium who claimed to be channelling the spirit of a Native American called White Eagle. We now have the marriage register from the Reading White Eagle Lodge, 1974-1990 (D/RG1).

An unexpected arrival from a more conventional church consists of the minutes of Sunday School teachers at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Reading, 1924-1939 (D/EX2366).

## Reading Borough deposited collections

More of the Reading Borough deposited collections have been listed. Of interest to family historians is a small collection of wills and probates, mostly for people from Reading, 1646-1891 (R/D205). A stray item from Newbury which has ended up in the Reading Borough deposited collections is the bond of John Dibley to guarantee Newbury ratepayers against any charge his residence there might incur, should he fall on hard times, dated 1638 (R/D209).

## Berkshire people at school, work and play

Our limited holdings for private schools have been supplemented by a small group of papers relating to Courtenay Lodge School, Sutton Courtenay (later in Earley), 1924-1939 (D/EX2479). We have catalogued records of John Powell & Son, a Reading dispensing chemist, 1847-1920 (R/D128), which include recipes for some of the firm's products. A small but interesting collection of 20th century theatre programmes includes a number from the amateur dramatic group at AWRE Aldermaston (D/EX2332).

## Opening Hours

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

## Contact Information:

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## Funding Partners

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