

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo Issue 66

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From the Editor

This winter sees a national campaign 'Explore Your Archive', run by the National Archives, which has the aim of encouraging people to find out where their local archive is and what it holds.

To achieve that aim would be fabulous. Archives have a habit of simply appearing in the media – in print, on radio or on television – as if conjured magically by the content fairy to illustrate someone else's words. The best we can usually hope for is a small, easily missed credit at the end of whatever feature the archives support.

Why should this be so? It could be argued that in many ways archives are both a silent and invisible resource. They don't have a massive front-of-house presence, like a museum or gallery; they don't bstride the skyline like a historic property. It is easy to ignore them and to relegate them to the bottom of the heritage ladder.

What is harder to ignore is the stories that archives contain. I remember that a few years ago the British Museum's Top Ten Treasures concluded with their Vindolanda tablets – which is an archive by anyone's standards. Here's what the BM website says about the tablets: 'the content is fascinating, giving us a remarkable insight into working and private lives'. Without them, we could guess at how the British Romans lived; with them, we know.

And that, in a nutshell, is why archives are so great. They speak to you from across the centuries. You don't have to imagine what it was like then, because the archives will tell you. There are plenty of old and pretty objects to look and marvel at, but as the 'Explore Your Archive' team have it: 'a world without archives is a world without memory'.

Somehow the world of archives needs to find a way of embedding that opinion within the world at large. We need to get round that lack of front-of-house, that lack of visibility that means while our documents are allowed to speak, those who look after them are seldom heard.

So we think that the 'Explore Your Archive' campaign is a good thing. This Echo is one of the things that we are doing for it. We have decided to focus on the things that are lost to time, and how archives can bring them alive again. We hope as always that you discover something new about Berkshire's history from us. We hope also that you will tell other people about what you have read, and where you read it. Sometimes it is the smallest things that are the most interesting.

For more about 'Explore Your Archive' visit: www.exploreyourarchive.org.

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

The 18th century village: a dayschool

County Archivist Dr Peter Durrant and Mrs Joan Dils will be leading a dayschool on sources for the 18th century village at BRO on Saturday 22 February. It will focus on the work of parish officers in Berkshire. Book online at www.conted.ox.ac.uk; the cost is £53. Places are limited to 20 students.

Mark Stevens
Senior Archivist



Explore Your Archive Lost Landscapes



ARCHIVE
EXPLORED
DISCOVERED
FOUND
DETECTED
CONNECTED
ENGAGED
UNEARTHED
LEARNT
IMAGINED
CREATED
UNLOCKED
OPENED

Strips in the common field of Charney Bassett, 1765 (D/EEL/P1)

One of the ways that archives can help to understand the past is through change. For example, the patchwork of fields and hedgerows that we think of as typical English countryside is a relatively modern phenomenon. Until the 18th, and in some cases the 19th century, things were very different. Very few farmers had the luxury of large fields to cultivate as they wished.

The soil most suitable for crops was in most places formed into one or more 'common fields'. They were then subdivided into an enormous number of long, narrow strips, each of which belonged to an individual. These could be bought and sold like any other property. So a wealthier member of the community might own a very large number of these strips, but they would be usually scattered across a number of common fields. And you couldn't just sow or plough your own strip - it had to be done in conjunction with other villagers.

In addition, there would be common pastures where animals could be grazed; while common woods and wastes allowed everyone to gather wood and turf for fuel and building, including the poorest who had no property and hence no other common rights.

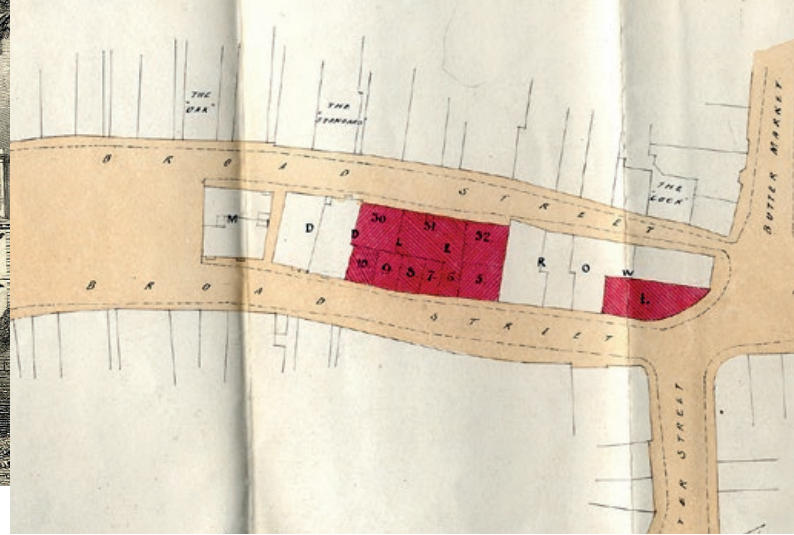
Such fragmented farming was increasingly thought to be inefficient, and over a period of around a century the landscape was permanently altered to create bigger farms. This was the process of enclosure. In each parish or manor,

commissioners were appointed to carve up the old common lands and pastures into the fields we know today. Each of these became the freehold property of its new owner, allocated according to the value of their common rights. Hedges enclosed them. The poor usually lost their common rights entirely and instead became dependant on charities given allotments for their benefit.

Enclosure maps and awards are well known as a source for local history, and ours can all be viewed online at www.berkshirenclosure.org.uk. But, frustratingly, they rarely show us what the landscape was like before enclosure. So is our historic landscape lost forever?

Fortunately not. Not only are there a handful of working maps drawn up by the enclosure commissioners revealing the existing common fields just before enclosure, such as one for Ardington (D/EL/P1) but rarely, maps survive that show the pre-enclosure fields in their entirety. At BRO, there are examples for Charney Bassett in 1765 (D/EEL/P1) and Earley in 1669 (D/EX1648/1), among others. We think of our current rural landscape as having been around forever: archives show that it has only taken the place of what is now lost.





A country house lost in time

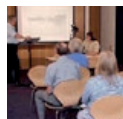
Until the end of the 19th century much of the county was dominated by great estates, whose owners lived in magnificent mansions. As the money that funded these estates dried up – or their heirs were lost to war – these houses either began to look to institutional owners or were demolished.

One of the finest of these mansions was Coleshill House. For many years assumed to be the work of Inigo Jones, Coleshill was actually designed by Sir Roger Pratt in 1650 for his cousin Sir George. It passed by marriage into the hands of the Pleydell Bouverie family, and there it remained until it burned down – the result of an errant paint stripper’s blow torch - in 1952.

Though the house was destroyed, it lives on in the Pleydell Bouverie archive. The family’s papers provide not just some plans of the lost building, but also a wealth of information about how the house was run. This reveals, for example, the problem of servant collisions in the dark service corridors as well as the lament that the estate’s income barely covered the annual day of feasting for the tenants at the big house.

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.



Browne’s Hill: a lost Reading landmark

Archives can also let us into history’s secrets: those things once obvious but now forgotten. For instance, few nowadays have heard of Browne’s Hill in Reading, but 400 years ago it would have been hard to miss.

Browne’s Hill was the old name for the eastern end of Broad Street, where since the middle ages butchers had set up their stalls on market days. The roadway there still slopes a little, but if it was ever a real hill it was levelled in the 1630s. The more likely reason for the name was ironic: a smelly waste heap best avoided.

When the borough built the New Shambles on the site the hill may have gone but the smell persisted. For now there was a double row of shops - Butcher Row, for the butchers, and Fisher Row for the fishmongers. It must have been incredibly noisy as well as smelly, with shopkeepers trying to sell their wares right next to all of their direct rivals. Disturbingly close to the site as well from a public health standpoint was part of the town’s waterworks, constructed in 1696 to provide ‘fresh’ water pumped from the Kennet.

One of our early leases of the Shambles (from R/AT) describes it as ‘a plot of ground lately enclosed with posts and rails’; in all it measured just 105 feet x 33 feet. The upper floors were occupied by the Wool Hall, where the wealthy cloth dealers checked woollen yarn and finished cloth.

The Shambles fell out of use in the 18th century and the butchers and fishmongers had disappeared by the Victorian period. Increasingly considered to be an eyesore, the whole block of Stuart buildings were demolished in the 1850s.

Left: Coleshill House in 1822 (D/EX130/3/10/2)
Right: Middle Row in the 1850s just before its demolition (R/AT/1)



New to the Archives

Local government

More exciting material has been uncovered in the property records of Reading Borough, including terriers and registers of leases, 1807-1898 (R/AT5-6). The earliest terrier is filled with beautiful plans of property the Corporation owned throughout Berkshire, including the original Oracle building. We have also catalogued deeds and plans of property purchased in the 19th century by the Local Board of Health (R/AT7). This includes the shops in the middle of Broad Street, the original King's Meadow bathing pool, and waterworks built to serve the town in the 17th century.

Parish Councils were established in 1894 to take over the civil responsibilities of parishes. The following Parish Councils have recently deposited records dating back to their early days:

- Bray (CPC23)
- Cold Ash (CPC130D)
- Easthampstead (CPC49)
- Harwell (CPC64)
- Kintbury (CPC78)
- Watchfield (CPC112C)
- Yattendon (CPC159)

Berkshire buildings

We have acquired papers relating to building the clock in the tower of Reading Town Hall, 1876 (D/EX2195). We also now have a 1922 sale catalogue for Temple House, Bisham (D/EX2306), and particulars for the sale of the contents of Sheepstead House, Marcham, 1949 (D/EX2259). An extremely attractive lithograph of 1843 shows architect Benjamin Baud's vision of Victoria Terrace and Upton (later Herschel) Park, Slough, a high-class 19th century housing development (D/EX2323).

A small group of deeds for a medieval property in Abingdon, which belonged to a Sunningwell charity, has been purchased (D/EZ175). We have also received a deed for East Ilsley Manor and Ilsley Farm, 1717 (D/EX2361). A small collection of deeds of property in Reading includes a partnership deed for a local vet in 1865 (D/EX2277), while a collection of deeds for over 100 properties, mainly in Windsor and Clewer, has been listed (D/EX2207). The papers of the Allright family also include deeds for property in Arborfield, Barkham, Hurst, Shinfield and Swallowfield, (D/EX2216). Other deeds relate to property of the Floyd family in Frilsham, Thatcham and Yattendon (D/EX2246), and to that of the Collins and Smith families in East Challow, Grove and Wantage (D/EX2336).



Upton Park, Slough (D/EX2323/1)

Photographs

A rare set of photographic views of 19th century Reading has been listed (D/EX2091). We have also acquired early 20th century photographs of Kintbury parish church (D/EX2302) and scenes in Reading and Sonning (D/EX2310).

New parish and nonconformist registers

Beenham: marriages, 1984-2008 (D/P16)
Caversham St John: baptisms, 1949-1969; marriages, 1958-1992; banns, 1988-2001
Hinton Waldrist: banns, 1906-1994 (D/P70)
Wokingham Methodist Church: baptisms, 1967-2007 (D/MS14)

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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