

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

January 2016

The Berkshire Echo

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From the Editor

Happy New Year from the Berkshire Record Office, and welcome to the first edition of the Berkshire Echo for 2016. To coincide with the 50th anniversary of Pevsner's Berkshire edition of his 'Buildings of England' series, we decided to focus on architectural history in Berkshire.

Architecture is a bit of a 'marmite' subject - people can often love or hate the buildings designed by architects. Architectural design and development is often what stirs people into action when a building is threatened with demolition. Indeed even architects can protest against such things as we discover in the article on the Berkshire architect, Conrad Birdwood Willcocks.

Willcocks began his career as an architect in Reading and from his collection of records we gain an insight into the work of an early twentieth century architect. It is interesting to read that he even designed the furniture to go into his houses.

This makes a great deal of sense really – how often do you find a house you want to move into, only to discover that your furniture doesn't fit?

Seemingly ordinary planning records can sometimes provide an insight into the planning and design stage that you would not necessarily expect. As we read in the article on Slough, sometimes problems can occur and not even get beyond the planning stage. Records can provide the opportunity for discovery. Hopefully you will enjoy reading this architectural edition and be inspired to research into the records of Willcocks and other records held here at the BRO.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

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.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

To mark the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, the BRO will be holding an exhibition relating to the internment of Irish prisoners in Reading Prison. It will be available during our opening hours from 27 April 2016. Free admission.

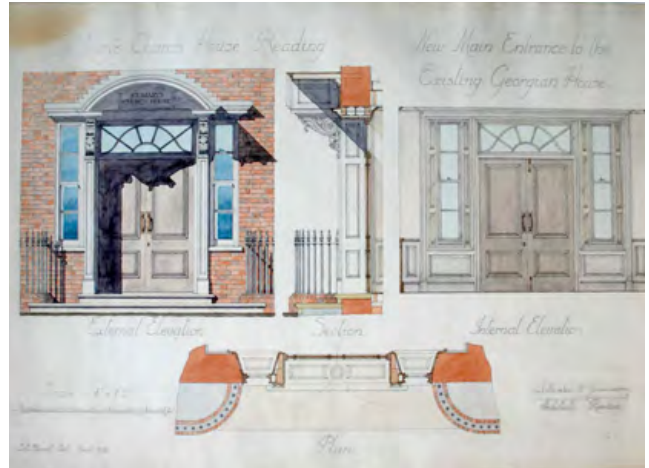
Former County Archivist Dr Peter Durrant will be leading a dayschool at the Record Office on Saturday 20 February 2016 on 'Improving Berkshire's Towns, c. 1780-1860'. Advance booking essential. See <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/details.php?id=V200-163> for more details.

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. Check it out at <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com/>.



An essentially English architect



The papers of prominent local architect Conrad Birdwood Willcocks have just been catalogued (D/EWK). The archive contains all the plans and papers for almost every project he worked on, and can now be consulted at Berkshire Record Office. Willcocks was born in Malmesbury, Wiltshire, on 18 June 1887, and the family moved to Reading when he was four. His father died on 15 December 1896, when he was only nine years old. Young Conrad was a pupil at Reading School, but left at the age of 16. In June 1905 the Willcocks family moved to Caversham Heights, and Willcocks began his architectural career by becoming articled to Reading architect W G A Hambling.

Willcocks sat his architecture exams at University College, Reading, between 1906 and 1909. After leaving Hambling in 1908, Willcocks worked for short periods for W Roland Howell in Reading and a firm in London, before setting up on his own. He received his first private commission in October 1908 to design a pair of cottages in Whitley Wood for Mrs Phippen. In 1910 he entered a

competition to design the new Arthur Hill Memorial Baths in Reading, which he won. He oversaw the construction of the project, which opened on 29 November 1911, the day before he sat (and passed) his final RIBA exam.

In 1914 he built a house called Willstead for himself, his mother, and sister Winifred, in St Peter's Avenue, Caversham. He worked on several local authority housing schemes, and designed a large number of private houses, mostly in Reading and Caversham. He was very close to his mother and many of his early clients appear to have come through her friends and contacts. One client, Miss Gezelschap, writing to Willcocks in the 1920s in connection with a house he was designing for her, described him as 'a perfect angel of kindness & patience & goodness, your mother is quite right in saying this so often'.

During the Second World War, in common with all architects, Willcocks' private work was greatly reduced. However, he continued to be very busy, working on war damage reparations

and industrial work, as well as being a member of the Home Guard. He constructed rifle ranges in his garden where his platoon practiced every Sunday afternoon. After the war he continued to design houses and act as a consultant into his late seventies.

Willcocks' early style was influenced by the Arts & Crafts movement, and this can be seen particularly in his own house and other houses he designed in St Peter's Avenue and Woodcote Road in Caversham. He believed in designing houses as living spaces. Many of his clients were women and he was particularly interested in how the design of the house could make housework easier (even though most of his clients still had maids). As well as designing the house he also designed much of the furniture. His many plans for public houses include full size drawings of the tables and chairs to be used in the bar. In his obituary in the RIBA Journal in 1973, one former pupil described him as a 'perfectionist' and stated he 'became, to contractors, a force to be reckoned with, *continued...*

Left: Willcocks at the opening of the Arthur Hill Baths, 1911 (D/EWK/B314/3/6)
Right: Part of Willcocks' design for St Mary's Church House, Reading (D/EWK/B314/197)



An essentially English architect continued...

for his insistence on standards of materials and workmanship was second to none'. It concluded 'he will be missed for his quiet competence and the essential Englishness of his art'.

In addition to his private practice Willcocks was a leading figure in local architectural and local history groups, especially in his later years. He was a leading supporter of the compulsory use of advisory architectural panels by local councils for approving elevations, and was a panel architect for Bradfield Rural District Council from 1933 to 1944. From the 1940s to 1960s he represented the Berkshire Society of Architects in discussions with Reading Borough Council about the listing of

historical buildings. He was part of an unsuccessful appeal to save Southcote Manor House from demolition in 1920, but was successful in the 1930s in preserving Bulmershe Manor. In the 1950s he provided testimony against plans to build a new Reading Civic Centre on the site of Albion Place and Watlington House garden.

In 1921 Willcocks founded the Local History Recording Scheme, with the aim to preserve interesting facts of local history not otherwise chronicled. This was a national scheme, but the Berkshire branch was by far the most active, running from 1924 until at least 1972, with correspondents in most parishes. Willcocks founded

the Berkshire Architectural Records Committee in December 1940, to produce a photographic record of buildings which might be destroyed by bombing. It has been claimed that it was this idea which resulted in the National Buildings Record being set up. He was also involved in the early planning for setting up a Berkshire Record Society and Record Office from 1929 to 1935.

Willcocks never married. After his mother died in 1937 he continued to live with his sister at Willstead, and alone after her death in 1966. He died on 25 December 1972, leaving his house to the National Trust and his extensive archive to Berkshire Record Office.

“Useless to employ first class architects” in Slough?

The Slough Borough building control plans (S/SB) offer a glimpse into local control of housing and commercial development in the first half of the 20th century. The 1930s saw the development of the art of town planning across the country. A Town Planning Scheme was drawn up for Slough in 1931, leading to greater scrutiny of applications. For instance, small, cheap houses were generally not approved in areas dominated by larger or more expensive ones. When A T Ricketts' application for two houses in Merton Road was rejected in 1936 due to insufficient space between the walls and the edge of the site, he complained, “the plots are not wide enough to abide by this rule, unless we make the houses so very small. You will no doubt agree it is a shame to build small houses in a road like Merton Road.”

Developer G Wrightson-Ibbs, who wanted to build a flat-roofed concrete house in the latest style in Bath Road in 1935, complained to the council (who thought it out of keeping with the area), “It is useless to employ 1st class architects [as] the only houses your Committee will approve are of houses which are being erected in thousands all over the district”.



Writing in 1934 to another applicant, James Bott, the committee noted plaintively, “in the great majority of cases the local builders have welcomed the advice given by the Panel, and it is much to be regretted that you have so far declined to co-operate”.

Mistakes were made, however: in 1933 permission was accidentally granted for one man to build a bungalow on land intended to be the site of a new road. In 1936 the committee refused a 60-house development at Salt Hill – only for it to be surreptitiously resubmitted unchanged the following month, and permission granted by nodding councillors.



New to the Archives

House and property history

A missing rate book has been discovered for Moulsoford, 1872-1876 (RD/W). We have received sale catalogues for Chalk Pit House, Littlewick Green, 1962 (D/EX2399) and property in Wallingford, 1846 and 1940 (D/EX2446).

We have also acquired a 'copy of court roll' (a type of deed) for premises called Wilders belonging to the manor of Stratfield Mortimer, 1766 (D/EX1624). Deeds of a number of Reading and Tilehurst

properties, 1630-1881 (and a couple from Bray and Winkfield in the 1330s), have been catalogued as part of our ongoing project to list various miscellaneous documents acquired by Reading Borough (R/D). Also emerging from this project are the letter book of Reading millwright and engineer James Phillips, 1850-1860, who did work at various local mills, and other premises including Littlemore Asylum in Oxfordshire (R/D148); papers relating to the proposed paving and lighting of Reading streets, 1784-1785 (R/D172); and a land tax assessment for Earley, 1766 (R/D179). We have also acquired an abstract of title for 44-46 London Street, Reading, 1878 (D/EZ178).

New freedom: Berkshire and the world

One of the most fascinating documents in the Reading Borough deposited collections is the letter book of a firm of solicitors relating to the Morant Estate in Jamaica, which had been owned by Frances Jennings of Reading (R/D177). It covers the short period 1833-1840, which was when slavery was finally abolished in the West Indies. Some of the letter writers criticised the immoral behaviour of the local white population, while others feared that those released at last from the bonds of slavery might not be willing to continue as paid labourers on the estate. Meanwhile, a letter from emigrant Charles Hissey in 1836 lauds his new life in Canada, which he thought 'just as good' as the USA (R/D167).

Life and death in Berkshire: coroners and health records

Family historians will be pleased to learn that our latest project involves listing and indexing the records of coroners' inquests, and so far work has been completed on Abingdon District (covering all of north Berkshire), 1894-1942 (COR/A). We have listed records from the Queen Victoria Institute



for District Nursing, 1897-1961 (R/D146). This institution provided nursing and midwifery for the poor in Caversham, Reading and Tilehurst. We have also received the training notes of a student nurse at Newbury District Hospital (D/EX2458).

Local officials

Light is cast on the work of the County Council by the series of annual reports of its chief officers, 1904-1974 (C/CL/C7). These include, at different dates, the Medical Officer of Health, the County Surveyor, Chief Inspector of Weights and Measures, County Librarian and Chief Fire Officer. The collection also includes reports from the Education Committee, 1958-1967, and the Youth Employment Service, 1960-1968. We have also catalogued the bond of James Macaulay, appointed as collector of stamp duty in Reading, 1861 (R/D210/1).

Leisure options: Berkshire's clubs and societies

We are pleased to report the arrival of the archive of Berkshire County Cricket Club, 1903-2013 (D/EX2432). Less distinguished in sporting terms, but of local interest, are the records of St Sebastian's Football Club, Wokingham, 1946-1975 (D/EX2442). Other collections now available include records of Reading Horticultural and Reading & District Rose and Sweet Pea Society, 1902-1923 (R/D143); Reading Chess Club, 1899-1951 (R/D144); and scrapbooks from Berkshire Archaeological Society (R/D194).

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.

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Funding Partners

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