

# BRO

The Berkshire Record Office  
The Archives of the Royal County

## The Berkshire Echo October 2014

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### From the Editor

George III, 1789 (D/ED/F128)



The Georgians landed in Britain in 1714, when George of Hanover found himself parachuted onto the nation's throne. George and his successors subsequently gave their name to our description of the 18th century.

Like all historical divisions, this one is slightly artificial. There are various things that historians recognise as defining the Georgian age. Some of these – a certain architectural style, wigs, endless romantic poetry – are things that we see as being limited to the period. But there were plenty of values in Georgian life that have continued until the present day.

This Echo has small pieces that mention some of these values: personal vanity, entrepreneurship and religious fundamentalism. There are others: the rise of politics, the automation of industry, the growth of scientific method. It was truly a time in thrall to freedom, as ideas were liberated and allowed to flourish unfettered. It was only later that those spoilsport Victorians came along and started regulating everything.

It was also the Georgians who began collecting objects to help study the past, gathering these objects together so that researchers could have access to the raw materials of history. History itself became important – and that's one Georgian value that the BRO is certainly happy to maintain.



**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 6 October and 9 February, at 2 pm. To book your place, telephone: 0118 9375132 or email: [arch@reading.gov.uk](mailto:arch@reading.gov.uk).

#### The Early Twentieth Century: Conflict and change

On Saturday 18 October, Berkshire Family History Society is holding a one-day conference for family and local historians at Theale Green School. It costs £37.50 per person including lunch, and you can pick up a booking form at the Record Office. For more details, see [www.berksfhs.org.uk/conference](http://www.berksfhs.org.uk/conference).





## A Romantic Royal Secret

In Georgian England, members of the royal family were not expected to marry for love, but to wed as the politics of the nation required. So when Prince William, the Duke of Gloucester, fell in love with a commoner, he felt obliged to keep the matter secret.

William – a grandson of George II - was in his early 20s when he met Maria Walpole at Frogmore House in Windsor Home Park. Maria was a widowed mother of three, and seven years older than her new beau. Though she was also the granddaughter of a senior figure – in her case, statesman Sir Robert Walpole – she was not an obvious match, and she was most definitely not royalty.

The two married in London in secret in 1766; after Prince William was appointed warden of Windsor Forest, they set up home in Clewer, in a house built for Maria. It was called

Gloucester Lodge. A marriage settlement relating to the property is at the BRO (D/EZ164/1).

In 1771 William's brother, Prince Henry, Duke of Cumberland, also married a commoner. He was less discreet than his brother, and an enraged George III pushed through the Royal Marriages Act, declaring that no descendants of George II might marry without the monarch's consent.

When Maria became pregnant with William's first child, he was obliged to make his own secret marriage known. Happily though, the couple were reconciled with the king, and their son William married George III's youngest daughter.

*Above: Gloucester Lodge (later St Leonard's Hill), Clewer, the home of William and Maria, as it was in 1869 (D/EX888/1)*

### DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

#### **World War I blog launched**

In August we launched our blog recording World War 1 as seen through Berkshire eyes. Each post relates to that day or month 100 years earlier. Check it out at <http://berkshirevoiceswwi.wordpress.com/>. New entries are added frequently.

#### **Oscar Wilde and Reading Gaol**

Our autumn exhibition will open on 22 October. Featuring items from the Prison archive, the University of Reading and from Reading Museum, it will tell the story of the Victorian prison and also reflect on Oscar's life both inside and outside it.

#### **Life in the Victorian Asylum**

Mark Stevens' new book, based on our own Fair Mile Hospital archive, is due out in October. It details the daily routines of the thousands of ordinary people who experienced Victorian mental health care.





## The Profits of Empire Invested at Home

One distinctive feature of Georgian Berkshire was the influx of men who had made a fortune in India, working as part of the East India Company. These men – called ‘nabobs’ – were looking for something on which to spend their money, and they found it in the purchase of property.

George Vansittart was one such nabob, and Bisham Abbey was the property he purchased. George was born in 1743, the youngest son of Arthur Vansittart of Shottesbrooke Park. He was educated at Reading School, and went to India in 1761 to join his elder brother Henry, who was Governor of Bengal.

George applied himself to his new location. He studied Indian society, and stayed in Bengal after Henry’s term of office ended, serving as the official Persian translator to senior officials in the province. He was also Resident of Midnapore, responsible for collecting revenue, administering justice and directing military operations there and later in Calcutta. Like many nabobs, he also had his own thriving business as a merchant of various items – including control of the local opium trade. He left India in 1776 having amassed a ‘moderate’ fortune, which he used to buy Bisham when the estate came on the market in 1780.

George settled at Bisham with his wife Sarah and young family. He filled the house with antique furniture and works of art. He managed the estate conscientiously, even sending the children of employees to be educated. He died there in January 1825, having established a new dynasty of local gentry – and whose archive is now available for study here.

## What Not to Hair

The average Georgian upper or middle class person would easily understand the early 21st century: they shared our obsession with personal branding, look and image.

The well-to-do Georgian was only too happy to spend time and money on health and beauty products. One must-have purchase was white or grey hairpowder, which was used to thickly coat the natural hair or the wig you wore. The product was a classic status symbol: hairpowder was heavily taxed as a luxury, so its use implied wealth and opulence.

The use of hairpowder infiltrated every walk of life, including the churches of the new evangelical congregations.

Amongst the records of Broad Street Independent Church in Reading (now Waterstone’s), there is an open letter to fellow worshippers in 1797, in which one member of the church stated that ‘the increasing use of hair powder were hurtful to his mind’.

He begged that the church might be free of styling products. But fashion won out: while the member left, the hairpowder stayed.



## New to the Archives



### *The Residence and Property of Thomas Jesse Esq<sup>r</sup>*

#### Building Reading

The extensive archive of the Jesse family of Reading (D/EX1942) casts valuable light on the Victorian and Edwardian development of the town. Over three generations, the family developed several areas of Reading and Caversham. They laid out new streets, built new houses or sold vacant plots for a purchaser to build his own. Areas they developed included the north side of Castle Hill (where Jesse Terrace is); the area around Yeomanry House (which includes the Record Office site); and the Elm Park and Whitley Rise estates. They also sold the Elm Park ground to Reading Football Club. North of the river they developed Caversham Heights, Priest Hill, Rosehill and the Warren. The archive includes plans for many of the houses they built, and some delightful watercolours of Castle Hill in 1813. An unexpected gem in the collection is the hitherto unknown order book of the Commissioners for the management of the River Thames between Reading and Windsor, 1731, which is substantially earlier than other records for the management of the Thames.

#### New Light on Nonconformists

Deeds relating to Reading's Broad Street Chapel reveal hitherto unknown aspects of its history (D/EBA). In 1709, when the building was first put in trust, there was a real concern that the official toleration of nonconformist worship (permitted since 1689) might be withdrawn, driving non-Anglicans underground. The deeds provided for the chapel to be sold back to the vendor if that happened, with the money to be spent on Bibles instead. A fascinating letter from the Revd John Winter, the Independent minister at Newbury, to his brother (D/EZ170), provides candid commentary on the economic hard times affecting the area in 1816, including unemployment in the woollen cloth industry, with people being forced from their homes due to the landlord's bankruptcy. The church itself (now Newbury URC) has also added to its archive here (D/N32), including deeds of the chapel and adjacent property, and of a daughter chapels in Hamstead Marshall; and papers relating to rebuilding the church in the 1820s, and the call of ministers in the 1860s.

The archive of East Ilsley Baptist Church and the Ashampstead Group (D/N58) relates to chapels in those two villages and in West Ilsley, Compton and Streatley from 1832

until the last chapel closed in 2012. We have also received records of the Young Men's Society at King's Road Baptist Church in Reading, 1892-1897 (D/N2); and deeds of Reading Unitarian Church, 1880-1896 (D/EX2357).

#### Photographs

We were excited to receive more than 9000 aerial photographs of the county commissioned by Berkshire County Council every five years between 1964 and 1996 (C/PL). Although there are some gaps in coverage, it is still a remarkably complete collection of images which acts as a supplement to our limited map holdings for the period. We have also acquired photographs of the old Metal Box building in Reading, which is presently being demolished (D/EX2391).

#### 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.



#### 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.

#### Contact Information:

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#### Funding Partners

- ❖ Bracknell Forest Council
- ❖ Reading Borough Council
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- ❖ The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead
- ❖ Wokingham Borough Council



Castle Hill House (home of the Jesses) and their first development, Jesse Place, on the north side of Castle Hill, Reading (D/EX1942/2/5/3)

