

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

October 2015

The Berkshire Echo

From the Editor

Welcome to the October edition of the Berkshire Echo. It focuses on the Women's Institute (WI) as the National Federation of the WI turned 100 on 16th September 2015. The first WI in Britain was set up in Llanfairpwll in Anglesey, Wales. However its origins began in Ontario, Canada in 1897 as a branch of the Farmer's Institute. The WI brought together women from isolated areas offering training and advice in home economics, child care and farming activities.

The WI in Britain initially formed under the Agricultural Organisation Society to provide support for the country during the First World War by growing and preserving food. By 1917 the organisation was so large that a National Federation was formed which also included county federations.

The Berkshire Federation held its first meeting in January 1920 in Reading. From the outset the Federation and its WIs aimed to educate rural women, to help the war effort and to share and learn new skills. We can see this in the article regarding Berkshire's first WI in Hurst where they assisted in making bandages for wounded soldiers as well as learning how to make gloves.

In this edition we also get to see what the WIs did for their 50th anniversary, what they thought life in 2015 would be like and how they have supported the BRO through voluntary work.

The historical records of the WI held at the BRO have enabled us to write this newsletter as well as to put on an exhibition this autumn entitled "Inspiring Berkshire Women". This may encourage readers to look into the history of the WI in their own areas. Readers might even be inspired to use archives for some other historical research interest. So remember to take a look at the New to the Archives section as well as the BRO website for our online catalogue: www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk. The archives are just waiting to be explored.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

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- The WI scrapbooks: life in 1965...
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DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Inspiring Berkshire Women

Until the end of December 2015, the BRO will host an exhibition charting the history of local Women's Institutes in the national centenary year. This free exhibition will look at the campaigns and activities that have inspired women in the Berkshire branches of the WI over the last 100 years. Pop in during our opening hours and take a look.

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/>.



Berkshire's first Women's Institute

The very first Women's Institute (WI) in Berkshire was founded in Hurst on 10 April 1916. It was only the fifth in the whole country. Mrs Alice Martineau of Hurst Lodge invited her friend Mrs Watts, secretary of the National Council of Women's Institutes of Canada, to speak to local women. This inspired 46 Hurst women to join the new organisation, with Mrs Martineau as the first president. The Boy Scouts were recruited to take leaflets explaining the WI's objectives, and advertising the meetings planned for the first year, to every house in the parish. These were then followed up by personal visits by some of the founder members to encourage women to sign up.

The group's earliest activities included a good deal of war work: encouraging local people to invest in government

funds (the War Savings Loans, which were devoted to weapons manufacture during World War One); growing vegetables to feed wounded soldiers in the war hospitals in Reading; and working parties to make bandages for the same hospitals, and clothing for soldiers.

The archetypal WI programme was up and running from the start, with monthly meetings involving a speaker and competitions relating to gardening, cookery or needlework, sometimes supplemented with drama. Tea was of course an essential part of the proceedings! Handicraft sessions were also popular, with favoured activities including glovemaking using rabbitskin. Two of the founder members, Mabel Heath and Lily Barfoot, were still active some 50 years later.



The WI scrapbooks: life in 1965...

In 1965 the Women's Institutes of Berkshire celebrated the organisation's Golden Jubilee by asking each individual branch to create a scrapbook for their village. These remarkable pieces of work are a unique record of rural life as seen by ordinary women. They are often elaborately decorated and show members' artistic and practical skills, and their knowledge of their home turf. Many have been deposited here (most in the collection D/EX322), and they are well worth a look.

The scrapbook for Shaw-cum-Donnington WI (D/EX2190/1) is a typical example. The cover is embroidered with a picture of Donnington Castle, and the contents include photographs of heritage buildings in the parish and one showing a member

gathering wool from hedgerows for use in making dolls. There is a sketch map of the parish, and notes on the natural environment at a time when it was starting to come under threat. The women's interest in changing fashions keep the book firmly rooted in 1965, with pictures and pieces of fabric recording the latest fashion trends, and interior decoration styles in use in the village. There are even examples of contemporary Christmas wrapping paper, and advertisements for popular children's toys.

Images from left to right: WI members with an Easter cake, 1982 (D/EX1925/73/5). Berkshire Federation as a gift to the Queen for the newborn Prince Andrew in 1960 (D/EX2007/17/3/2). Embroidered image of Donnington Castle, on the cover of the Shaw-cum-Donnington WI scrapbook (D/EX2190/1). Fashion, 1965 style, from the Shaw-cum-Donnington WI scrapbook (D/EX2190/1).



The Stratfield Mortimer scrapbook (D/EX322/14) includes various suggestions from locals – ranging from primary school children to the local vicar – who had been asked to imagine what life would be like in the village in another 50 years – i.e. in 2015. Were they right?

Mr E Steel of Church Farm wrote his predictions as if he was living in his imagined 2015, opening with the apocalyptic statement 'It is now 10 years since a plough turned a furrow in Mortimer'. He foresaw all the local farmers uniting in 1985 to form a limited company and a single giant farm, highly mechanised and with only 10 employees. But in 2000 the pressures of development would see 'the last farmlands of the area ... disappearing beneath a welter of humanity and the remnants of the Mortimer holding ... taken over by a much bigger consortium, who were really speculators disguised as farmers'.

He envisioned the M4's arrival in 1972 making the village part of the commuter belt and "a speculator's paradise". He also imagined legislation in 1984 offering "a tax-free golden handshake to persons emigrating to the Republics of Australia and Canada" to relieve population pressures.

He ended, sinisterly, in 'February 2015':

'Malthus [the prophet of over-population doom] has thus proved drastically right and the report of the Conservation of Farmlands Committee is expected out soon. Too late, of course.'

No one else was quite as entertaining – or foresaw such disaster, although many feared the continued advance of suburbia. The primary school head teacher hoped future generations would still be able to study nature at first hand. Teenagers and young mums wanted better facilities for sport and recreation, hoping for a village swimming pool, gym, sports fields, a library and a nursery. The local doctor observed that the past 20 years had already seen a shift in illness from the problems of "dire poverty" to those caused by an affluent society, and an ageing population, and hoped the future would see the elderly being more valued within the community.

Most of the hopes for shiny new facilities in the village were to be dashed, although there are now tennis courts, a cricket pitch and a children's play area at the Fairground; and a pre-school meets childcare needs. Happily, local farms still exist, although they are more highly mechanised than in the past. Development has not swallowed up the countryside or forced mass emigration!

...and life in 2015 – the future?



Mortimer WI International Affairs class – the original caption reads 'We dispel our "jam-making" image!' (D/EX322/14)

WI members contribute to the Berkshire Record Office

Since 2005 we have been fortunate to have assistance from members of the Berkshire Federation of Women's Institutes. Having deposited a large collection of WI records, six women readily gave up their time to help us put them in order for storage in the strongrooms, and to undertake basic preservation measures to extend the life of the archive. The work involved mainly removing staples from minute books and sewing the pages together with linen thread, and also sticking loose pages securely into the books.

Joan Knock, a founding member of this volunteer group, enjoyed the work so much that she recruited another four members along the way, which made up for the two volunteers who had to step down. We now have eight volunteers who do vital work for the Record Office which it would not otherwise be possible to do.



New to the Archives

Relieving distress

Poverty in Reading in the early 20th century is revealed in applications for assistance received by the Reading Distress Committee, 1905-1921 (R/AS3). This committee, formed under the terms of the Unemployed Workmen Act 1905, was a joint venture between the borough council, the local Board of Guardians, and co-opted members. It aimed to find work for the respectable unemployed; those with a criminal record or who had previously been in the workhouse were denied help. The applications include much detail on the applicants' work history and circumstances and are a potentially valuable source for both social and family history.

Public Assistance: welfare in transition

We are pleased to announce the completion of the catalogue of Berkshire County Council's Public Assistance Department (C/PA). They relate to poor relief and health matters from the abolition of the Boards of Guardians in 1930 to the establishment of the Welfare State in 1948, and reflect the transformation of the old workhouses into hospitals and specialist homes. The amount surviving varies between different parts of the county, but the collection is particularly strong for children in local authority care, and for adults in the Windsor and Wokingham Poor Law Institutions, including wartime evacuees and bombing victims. Some material is still confidential, but we should now be able to provide information to relatives.

Safe from the Blitz in Berkshire

Newly available are a variety of records relating to the mass evacuation to Berkshire of children and mothers of infants in World War Two, and the ad-hoc arrival of others fleeing the Blitz. The County Council files relating to the administration of the scheme, and the difficulties arising, are full of fascinating details (C/CD/B). The collection of attendance registers for London schools evacuated to Berkshire during the Second World War (C/ED/H) list the children who came here and who remained with their original school group. We have also been given a copy of Bradfield RDC's official instructions to staff on how to deal with the initial influx in 1939 (D/EX2454). The last war-related item to arrive recently is an advertisement for War Agricultural Camps in 1945, which offered a working holiday to patriotic city dwellers (D/EX2369).

Maps and drawings

A recent purchase has been an intriguing 19th century plan showing the Berkshire parts of the Oxfordshire parish of

Whitchurch, small areas in modern Purley and Sulham (D/EZ183). We have been given a delightful watercolour sketch by the architect John Billing dating from 1844, showing frescoes in St Laurence's church, Reading (D/EX958).

New for house and property history

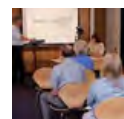
The surviving building control plans submitted to Easthampstead Rural District Council (mostly from the 1930s) have all been catalogued (RD/E/SB). In addition, we have some planning applications to Bracknell Forest Borough Council, 1980-1984 (DC/B), and an architect's drawing showing the proposed redevelopment of Station Square, Reading, 1928 (D/EX2446). We have also catalogued the papers of the Quarter Sessions Licencing Committee, 1903-1928, which include many reports on individual pubs (Q/AC6).



St Laurence's Church frescoes (D/EX958/2)

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.

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Funding Partners

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

