

BRO

The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

January 2017

The Berkshire Echo

From the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of the Berkshire Echo for 2017. In this edition we celebrate the completion of the cataloguing of the records of the Community of St John Baptist, Clewer – some 332 volumes, 578 bundles, 268 documents and other items! It is certainly a large collection and its completion marks the end of a great deal of work, but the records are also significant in terms of showcasing the work of the Sisters of the Convent through their care and devotion to helping those in need.

The community was established in 1852 and they ran orphanages, children's homes, boarding schools, hospitals and convalescent homes around the country as well as carrying out missionary work. They are probably best known in Berkshire for the House of Mercy in Hatch Lane, Clewer, which was a place where 'fallen women' could be rehabilitated. In the first article we discover how it was established thanks to the work of Mrs Tennant and in "Entering the House of Mercy: a Penitent testifies" we read the story of Mary Ford who required their help.

The aim was to provide fallen women with support and skills in order to gain employment and therefore avoid situations where they could become fallen again. Through the orphanages and homes care was extended to children and through convalescent hospitals and homes to the infirm and elderly. The Sisters also had a global presence such as providing training for nurses in India and homes for children in America.

It's a fascinating set of records and we are pleased that the completed catalogue is now readily available for research. You can look at the catalogue if you visit or via our online catalogue: <http://www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/search-archives/> search for reference D/EX 1675.

We hope you enjoy reading about the Community. Do take a look at the 'Dates for your diary' section as there are a number of events going on and don't forget to see the 'New to the Archives' for anything else that's new and of interest.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

- Clewer House of Mercy: an overview
- Entering the House of Mercy: a Penitent testifies
- New to the Archives

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Behind the Scenes at the BRO

21 January and 3 April 2017 - Discover how we store our documents and what our conservator does. It's FREE, but limited to 12 people. Booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

Collection Care

27th February 2017 - Learn how to remove sellotape, clean documents and more with our conservator. Cost is £25 per person and limited to 6 people. Booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

Introduction to Reading Old Handwriting

13th March 2017 - Learn how to read old handwriting through our introductory workshop. Cost is £20 per person and limited to 10 people. Booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.



Clewer House of Mercy: an overview



In the shadow of Windsor Castle, the back streets of the town were a den of iniquity in the middle of the 19th century. One of the worst of the social problems was the women who had fallen into drunkenness and prostitution, serving the nearby barracks. Mariquita Tennant, the Spanish born widow of an Anglican clergyman who had settled in Clewer, was inspired to work with these women and offer them a second chance. In December 1848 she took in Mary Ann (sometimes called Marianne) George, a pregnant 24 year old woman who lived a vagrant life with her mother, stepfather (the father of her own baby), and family. Other women and girls followed her. Mrs Tennant established a regime involving training in domestic work, which would give the women the skills to find work, and religious instruction intended to encourage them to repent their past lives.

Soon Mrs Tennant found assistance with her work from other upper class women with strong religious views, and she planned to organise them as a Sisterhood, an Anglican religious community for unmarried women under vows of chastity and poverty, similar to those taken by Catholic nuns. The house was formally constituted as a House of Mercy, with the aim of rehabilitating fallen women. The Revd Thomas Thelusson Carter, rector of Clewer, and a leading figure in the Anglo-Catholic movement, was a vital ally in her work.

Mrs Tennant's health was not up to the hard work of running the House of Mercy, but her retirement in 1851 paved the way for the foundation of the Community of St John Baptist (CSJB), an Anglican Sisterhood whose calling was initially to run the House of Mercy. A large convent building and House of Mercy was built in Hatch Lane, Clewer, and the new Community elected Harriet Monsell (nee O'Brien), another clergyman's widow, as its first Superior.

The regime was strict but not quite cheerless. Penitents were assigned to receive training in either the laundry or the needlework room, and the hours of hard work were relieved by sessions of one-to-one religious instruction, which was seen as key to their salvation. It was expected that the

Penitents would stay at the House of Mercy for two years, but since admission was entirely voluntary, those who found the life too hard could leave at any time. Most were aged roughly 17-22 when they arrived. Respectable jobs in domestic service were found for those leaving.

A small minority of Penitents wished to make a permanent commitment to become part of the Community, and they were accepted as Magdalens, the name recalling that of St Mary Magdalen. In 1946 the Magdalens' status was changed as they became founding members of the Society of St John the Forerunner, which had been instituted as a 'Third Order' of the Community, and later still the surviving former Magdalens were accepted as full members of the CSJB.

The CSJB was asked to take on the running of Houses of Mercy in other parts of the country, ranging from Devon to London. Social change meant that by the 1930s numbers were declining, and most of the Houses closed in the early years of the Second World War. Clewer, the first and the last, lasted until 1954.

The Sisters were involved on many other kinds of work. They set up several children's homes (called orphanages, but where many of the children had at least one parent living). Most were for girls, with one (St Augustine's, in Clewer), for boys. The home in Newport, Monmouthshire, specialised in what were rather horribly called 'fallen children', but today we would regard as victims of abuse. They took on educational work including the National, or Church of England, School, in Clewer, and two private boarding schools for girls from better off families – St Stephen's High School, in Clewer, and St Stephen's College, initially in Clewer and later in Kent. Convalescent homes for the poor, in Clewer, Torquay and Folkestone, were another venture, and the Community also had branches in India and the United States.

As numbers fell, the Clewer premises became too large, and the Sisters moved to Oxfordshire in 2000.

Penitents or Magdalens in the 1930s (D/EX1675/2/11/50)



Entering the House of Mercy: a Penitent testifies



Mary Ford, one of the first penitents in 1849, was a Wiltshire girl who had moved to Windsor to find work, but found herself in bad company. Here is her story:

“They told me at Windsor, there were a great many to lead young girls astray. They [acquaintances who had brought her the last part of the way] took me all over Windsor, & at last got a lodging in a wretched place to be sure. I must tell you, the first night I went to this wretched brothel, there was no room there. I went to Peascod Street. I only slept there one night. I don’t know if the House was respectable; the room was clean, I had a room to myself, & locked myself in. At last I got the lodging in the wretched hovel, a wretched place to be sure. In the morning I was never so much struck in my life before – I thought it a most dreadful place, a perfect Hell, there, that it was, - there was not one modest woman there, & of course when I got there, I was like that wretched lot.”

After a while, Mary’s friend Ruth Player invited her to seek sanctuary with her at Mrs Tennant’s house:

“In the evening, Ruth came in Lady’s great cloak etc & she said – “Here, our Molly, you are to come along with me, I have got a good home”. I said “Oh I am not clean enough, I’ll wait till the morning” and she said “The Lady is such a dear old Lady, & reads & prays to me such a many times & she’ll do the same by you etc and then she said she had brought Mr Carter, so I said, “what Carter” & looks out &

says “Do you think I am going along with that policeman? I told him I couldn’t go then, I was not fit”. He said something about “nothing like the time present”. Ruth told me not to be foolish, I’d got nothing to hinder me (Mr Carter was standing outside). Mr Carter gave me the money to pay the woman. He told me, I could get cleaned when I got there. I went in & paid the woman, & said I was going – the woman was angry; I told her I was going to a better home & thanked her for her kindness. She tried to throw me out of window, but Harriet hindered her. Harriet was strong & the woman knew it well, if it hadn’t been for H she certainly would have thrown me out, it was a wonder she didn’t...

Mr Carter brought me to Lady & I waited in the passage. He introduced me to the Lady. When I saw her, the first glimpse, I said “Why Ruth, why didn’t you tell me she was a female priest. That night she asked me if I’d have any supper, & she gave me some arrowroot & bread and butter and I said “Oh! That is a kind Lady”, & Ruth says “oh! That’s nothing, she do talk so, I do love her so”.

Mary benefitted from her time at Clewer, and after leaving sent donations from her wages, before she got married in 1857. Her friend Ruth, however, was dismissed in disgrace for bad behaviour.

Source: Penitents’ testimonies (D/EX1675/2/11/1)

*Left: Mother Harriet, First Mother Superior (D/EX1675/1/19/3/1)
Right: The Revd Thomas Thelusson Carter, first warden of the Community (D/EX1675/1/22/23)*

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Day Schools

Former County Archivist, Dr Peter Durrant, will be running two day schools at the BRO as part of Oxford University’s Department for Continuing Education programme. Both are limited to 20 places and require booking via the links.

Quarter Sessions

11th February 2017 - Look at the history, nature and work of the court of Quarter Sessions and examine records relating to Berkshire. <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/quarter-sessions-records?code=E16P293LHJ>

The Nineteenth Century Village: Government and Community

25th March 2017 - Explore issues that historians face when studying life in the countryside in the nineteenth century. <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/the-nineteenth-century-village-government-and-community?code=E16P294LHJ>



New to the Archives

Maps and plans

We were excited to receive the parish copies of the important enclosure maps for Charlton, 1867 (D/P143), and West Hanney, 1839 (D/P63), with the accompanying awards, plus the tithe award and several altered apportionments for Wantage, 1844-1874 (D/P143).

Berkshire at work

The Weavers' Company in Newbury was a powerful trade guild founded in the 16th century. We already held some of its records, but additional material has now been deposited, covering the period 1602-1905 and including the organisation's 1602 charter from Queen Elizabeth I (D/ENM8). 40 years later, the records of Faringdon Chamber of Trade, 1922-1984, show how business owners wanted to make that town a major shopping centre for the region (D/EX2523).

The changing streets

The minutes of Wantage Improvement Commissioners, 1828-1887, have been transferred here from Oxfordshire History Centre (WT/AS). The Commissioners were responsible for the streets, public lighting and security. We were also pleased to acquire a rare survival in the form of accounts of the mayor of Wallingford, 1623 (D/EX2497). We have catalogued Reading Borough's registers of hackney carriages, 1908-1969, which reveal the changeover from horse-drawn to motor transport and the first appearance of female conductors in 1915 – no doubt due to a wartime shortage of men (R/RV2). A map drawn up c.1902-1912 shows which streets and houses in Pangbourne were served by electricity (D/EX2456).

Berkshire at play

Records of the Reading Urban Wildlife Group, 1985-2014, provide an invaluable resource, both for natural history and as an example of local activism in the environmentally conscious late 20th and early 21st century (D/EX2478). We have also taken in records of the Winnersh Gardening Club, 1948-1986 (D/EX2514); records of Newbury Temperance Society, 1875-1958 (D/EX2492); and a few programmes from Maidenhead Drama Festival, 1978-2000 (D/EX2515).

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.



Berkshire at war

A scrapbook reveals the welcome given to Newbury men returning from service in the Boer War, 1901-1902 (D/EX2491). A 1942 geography student's project on Reading provides a snapshot of the town in the Second World War (D/EX2504).

New for family history

We have received the following nonconformist church registers:

- Bracknell Pentecostal Assembly: marriages, 1983-2009 (D/N62).
- Newbury United Reformed Church: baptisms, 1988-2011, and marriages, 1985-2014 (D/N32).
- Sandhurst Baptist Church: marriages, 1981-2010 (D/N61).
- Three Mile Cross Wesleyan Methodist Church: baptisms, 1908-1986 (D/MS75)

And also...

Miscellanea ranging from the 17th century to the 20th collected by local historian Llewellyn Treacher has been transferred here from Reading Local Studies Library (D/EX2474). Highlights include An Exhortation to the Working Classes (printed verses advocating pacifism), c. 1884, and a piano tuner's advertisement criticising the abilities of rival 'bogus' tuners.

Opening Hours

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

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