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The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo

January 2018

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WHAT'S ON

Orphans of the Sea

On until 16th February 2018, during normal opening hours

Orphans of the Sea: The History of the Royal Merchant Navy Education Foundation in London and Berkshire is an exhibition celebrating the 190th anniversary of one of Britain's foremost maritime charities. Explore the story of the Foundation and the children that it has helped. Available during our opening hours (Tuesday and Wednesday 9am to 5pm, Thursday 9am to 9pm and Friday 9am to 4.30pm). FREE admission. Why not come along and take a look?

How to Read Old Handwriting

26th February 2018, time 10.15-14.45

Always wanted to know how to read old handwriting? Come along to our introduction to reading handwriting found in documents at the BRO from c.1500 to 1700. The cost is £20 per person. There are 10 places available and booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

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From the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of the Berkshire Echo for 2018 and a Happy New Year to you all. We start the year by looking at the history of the Royal Merchant Navy Education Foundation as a follow up to completing the cataloguing of the collection and launching the "Orphans of the Sea" exhibition in November last year. If you've not been to it yet, do pop in and take a look – it's on until 16th February.

The 'Orphans of the Sea' article gives more detail on the history of the foundation which focussed on helping orphans of merchant seamen who had perished at sea, by providing board, clothing and education. In 'Life at the Institution' we gain a better idea of what the children could have expected whilst in the institution – good to know they were taught how to swim as part of their physical education.

The case studies of Elizabeth and Richard provide an insight into the lives of the children and what became of them once they left the institution.

The aim of the Foundation was to ensure that children were looked after and educated at a time when they lost their fathers and needed help. Today the Foundation continues to help children, but they do not need to have lost someone at sea in order to qualify. Rather they need be the child of someone who has served at sea and looking for assistance with their educational development. You can find out more about the Foundation here: rmnef.org.uk.

There are quite a few events listed in the What's On section and you can always keep up to date by visiting our website: www.berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk or social media pages on:

 @berksarchives

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Don't forget to see what's new to the archives – you never know what may be of interest to you. We hope you enjoy reading this edition.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

Top: Children at Bearwood



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The Berkshire Echo January 2018
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Top: RMNEF An Inspection

Orphans of the Sea: a short history of the RMNEF

At the beginning of the 19th century the merchant fleet was the backbone of the British Empire. It brought vast wealth to the country, but it was a perilous trade, and mariners faced the constant threat of disease, piracy and shipwreck. When disaster struck there was little help for the crew's families. In a move spearheaded by prominent members of the shipping community it was resolved to do something to aid mariners' families. In 1827 a public meeting was held in London, and it was decided that a Merchants' Seamen's Orphan Asylum be 'immediately established' to provide children with board, clothing and an education.

The asylum was initially located in Wapping and the first five boys were admitted in May 1828. In April 1829 a second asylum was established for girls nearby. Within five years both were full, so the two asylums amalgamated in 1834 and relocated to a larger property in Bow. By 1850, the Bow asylum was also full, so a new site at Snaresbrook, Wanstead, was chosen for its healthy countryside surroundings and accessibility from London's Docklands. The building had its foundation stone laid by Prince Albert, and opened in 1862 as the Merchant Seamen's Orphanage. Initially built to accommodate up to 200 children, it gradually extended to include a chapel, swimming pool and a further 100 orphans.

In 1902 King Edward VII awarded the institution a royal title, becoming the Royal Merchant Seamen's Orphanage. But by the early 20th century the shipping trade was depressed, benefactors reduced, dormitories overcrowded, and the countryside location had been swallowed by the city. Thankfully, insurance broker, Sir Thomas Devitt, and shipbuilder, Sir Alfred Yarrow, purchased the mansion and estate at Bearwood, Winnersh for £11,000, in 1912, and gave it to the charity. The orphanage moved to Bearwood in 1921.

In 1935 the orphanage became known as the Royal Merchant Navy School and began to take in fee-paying pupils from maritime backgrounds. By the 1960s falling pupil numbers resulted in the admittance of fee-payers from any background, and it was decided to stop admitting girls in 1963.

In 1977, the naval association was dropped altogether, and by 1981 the original charity separated from Bearwood College to become the Royal Merchant Navy School Foundation. The charity rebranded in 2013 and is currently known as the Royal Merchant Navy Education Foundation, providing vital support to those with seafaring backgrounds.

Life at the Institution

Open to the children aged between 7 and 13 of any seaman who had died whilst working, eligible applicants were submitted to bi-annual elections to be chosen by the charity's subscribers. The age orphans left increased to 18 by the 1950s; previously ineligible children, for example those of stokers who were not thought of as true seamen, were admitted; and, in the 1930s elections ceased as all those applying could be accommodated. Children attending the institution were treated firmly but fairly, provided with blue uniforms, plain wholesome food and kept in good health.

Until 1829 the children attended Wapping School, but from 1830 they were taught at the asylums by their master and matron. All orphans studied reading, writing, religion and morals, but girls also learnt needlework and domestic duties. As educational standards in society improved, subjects such as algebra and French were added, and in the 20th century the school adopted the National Curriculum. Physical education was also important and all children practised swimming and other sports regularly. They also participated in various activities, including Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, and a successful school band.



Case study: Elizabeth Mary Askins

Within the RMNEF collection there are a small number of surviving petitions (just six), which every child admitted would have presented to the board to be considered for election. These included details of their birth, father's death and medical examination results. Used with other records we can gain a fascinating insight into their family's situation at the time.

Elizabeth Mary Askins, born in 1861, was admitted to the institution in 1870. Her father, John William Askins, a ship's cook, had been lost on board the Matoaka leaving a widow and four children.

The Matoaka, a clipper, had left New Zealand for London in 1869 with an extraordinarily valuable cargo of wool, tallow, flour and gold worth £50,000. It never reached its destination and by 1870 it was suspected that all 47 passengers and 32 crew had drowned. Theories as to its fate flourished including



island shipwrecks, icebergs and reports of a ship being on fire near Bounty Island, but its fate remains unknown.

After leaving the orphanage Elizabeth married Arthur John Harvey, a joiner, in 1883, and they had seven children before she died in 1911.

From orphan to hero: Richard Been Stannard

One of the most noteworthy former pupils was Richard Been Stannard. Born in Blyth, 1902, he was admitted to the orphanage in 1912, after the death of his father George, a captain. He was joined by his two brothers, John and Knowles, as well as his sister Mary. At school he was known as a practical joker and the 'grand scrapper' due to a fight with a bigger boy lasting forty minutes.

He became a Royal Naval Reserve Lieutenant in 1940 and distinguished himself by spending two hours trying to extinguish a burning wharf, filled with grenades, at Namsos, Norway. He also successfully shielded his ship and crew, off the Norwegian coast, from 32 aircraft bombing raids over five days. For his valour and devotion to duty he was awarded the Victoria Cross. In recognition of his VC the children at the

school celebrated with a special tea of ice cream and iced buns, a rare treat in wartime Britain.

After the war he returned to his former position as chief officer for the Orient Line and, in 1952, was promoted to captain, before settling in Sydney, Australia as a Marine superintendent in 1955. He died in 1977 at the age of 74 in Sydney, Australia. *Source: the RMNEF archive (D/EX2363)*

Behind the Scenes at the BRO

Monday 22nd January 2018, time 10.30 to 11.30. Monday 19th March 2018, time 18.00 to 19.00

Ever wanted to know what goes on behind the scenes at the BRO? Come along and find out. You will be shown how we store our documents and given an insight to the job of our conservator. It's FREE and there are 12 spaces available on each tour. Booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

Preserving your Family Memorabilia

3rd March 2018, time 12.00-16.00

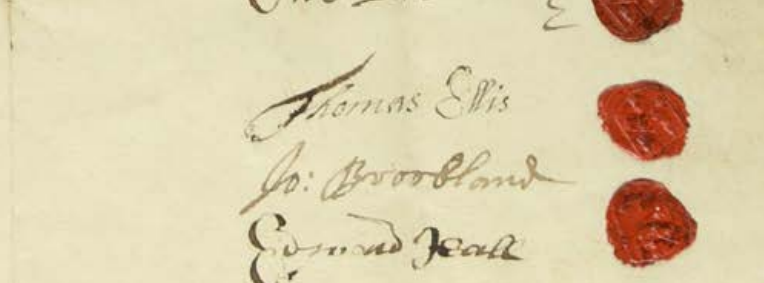
Discover how to take care of, protect and preserve cherished keepsakes, family history items and more with our conservator. Cost is £25 per person. There are 6 places available and booking is essential. Please email arch@reading.gov.uk or call 0118 937 5132.

Colours More than Sentences

14th March to 8th June 2018, during normal opening hours

Colours More than Sentences: Illustrated Editions of The Ballad of Reading Gaol is a national first for Reading – an exhibition of artists' interpretations of Oscar Wilde's classic poem, drawn from around the world. Available during our opening hours (Tuesday and Wednesday 9am to 5pm, Thursday 9am to 9pm and Friday 9am to 4.30pm). FREE admission. Why not come along and take a look?





New to the Archives

From the solicitors' offices

A recently completed cataloguing project is the very large collection of records accumulated by former Newbury solicitors Pitman & Bazett (D/EPT). They include deeds, plans and estate papers relating to many parts of west Berkshire, 1481-1937. Of particular interest is a volume of accounts of the Kendrick Charity workhouse in Newbury, 1628-1633. A significant addition has also been made to the records of Stuchbery & Son of Windsor, solicitors (D/ESB), which includes 18th-20th century deeds for properties in Maidenhead and Bray, and the trust deeds of the Presbyterian meeting house in Wantage, 1704-1893.

Private schools

As highlighted in this issue, the archive of the Royal Merchant Navy School and its predecessors, 1827-2002, is now available for research (D/EX2363). While our holdings of private school records are still scanty compared with those of state schools, we have had a number of other acquisitions, including the records of White House School (formerly Grosvenor House School), Wokingham, 1785-2012 (D/EX2314). This was a small boarding school, mainly for girls. A letter from Thomas Maher, a pupil at Caversham House Academy, in 1879, offers a rare peek into the lives of boarding school boys (D/EX2508). We have also received additional material for Lambrooks Haileybury School in Winkfield (D/EX1832), a boys' prep school; a deed of constitution for St Mark's School, Windsor, 1885 (D/EX2545); a photograph of pupils and staff at Reading Collegiate School, 1926 (D/EX2522); and the prospectus for Maiden Erleigh School, another boys' school, c.1935 (D/EX2541).

State schools

We have purchased the long-lost log book of Denchworth School, 1863-1891 (D/EZ187). The papers of Roger Tufnail of Reading include handbooks for school trips run by St Giles' Boys' School, 1910-1917 (D/EX2635). Records of The Hawthorns Primary School, Woosehill, Wokingham, 1986-1997, have also been deposited (SCH42).

'Considerable Improvement'

A detailed map of Earley Common Field and Mead in 1669 shows the area divided up into small strips a century before enclosure changed the face of the landscape (R/D178). It was drawn up by Edward Blagrave of Erleigh Court. An unusually detailed explanation of the need for enclosure has been discovered as part of the 1722/3 agreement for private enclosure of the common fields and commons in Sunningwell (D/EX2593). This states that 'by long experience it hath been found that the aforesaid Commons now yield little profit and advantage to the proprietors, the same being poor land and overgrown with furze & heath, but if the same were divided and Inclosed would be capable of Considerable Improvement'.

Manors

Some important manorial records have been transferred to us from Oxfordshire History Centre. These comprise court books and other records of Petwick and West Challow Manor, 1577-1609 (D/EX2525); and rentals and accounts of Wantage Manor, 1757-1912, (D/EX2524).

Top: Sunningwell enclosure agreement (D/EX2593/1)

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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