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The Berkshire Record Office
The Archives of the Royal County

The Berkshire Echo

July 2020

- Victory in Europe: celebrating VE Day
- Welcoming the heroes home
- A new world for the victorious and the vanquished
- New to the Archives

WHAT'S ON

Online now is our VE Day Exhibition, Through Their Eyes

The exhibition explores how the people of Berkshire prepared for conflict, adapted to unimaginable change and finally celebrated peace on VE Day. It aims to show something of Berkshire life during the Second World War and also how the county marked the war's end.

Why not take a look?

throughtheireyesww2.com

Keep an eye on our events page for any new activities:

berkshirerecordoffice.org.uk/events

From the Editor

Welcome to the Summer edition of our newsletter. Sadly, we're still working from home due to the current situation we're all in. We'd much rather be in the office with the collections and helping our users with their research! Despite not being in the office, we have managed to put together this newsletter from home which looks at the how the county dealt with VE Day back in 1945.

We discover exactly how the people of Berkshire celebrated the end of the war in Europe in 'Victory in Europe: celebrating VE Day'. There was dancing in the streets no less! But not everyone did so, some preferred a more private affair. In 'Welcoming the heroes home' we discover how those returning from the war were welcomed with further celebrations, sports activities and tea.

Life for those who came home was not the same and employment fears were rife. In 'A new world for the victorious and the vanquished' we find out more about such fears, but also how compassionate people were in trying to help families across Europe with donations.

We do hope that you will enjoy reading this edition. We also hope to be back in the office soon, but without access to the collections, we are unable to provide copies or undertake research right now.

Whilst we are able to receive emails, responses are very ad hoc so please do forgive us if we don't respond as quickly as you might hope. You can contact us via social media with any queries you may have and we'll do our best to help. Please see the links at the bottom of the page for our Twitter and Facebook accounts.

The What's On section is a little empty as we have had to cancel various events due to the uncertain times we are experiencing. Hopefully Heritage Open Days will go ahead in September and we'll be able to put on another 'Reading Old Handwriting' workshop and Behind the Scenes Tour. In the meantime, why don't you take a look at our online exhibition which ties in nicely with this newsletter?

The exhibition explores how the people of Berkshire prepared for conflict, adapted to unimaginable change and finally celebrated peace on VE Day. It aims to show something of Berkshire life during the Second World War and also how the county marked the war's end. Take a look and see what you can discover: throughtheireyesww2.com.

Remember to see what's new in the New to the Archives section. Enjoy reading, keep an eye on our website and social media feeds for any updates and Stay Safe.

Ivone Turnbull
Senior Archivist

Top: VE Day street party for children, Forest Road, Wokingham (WO/AZ1/2)



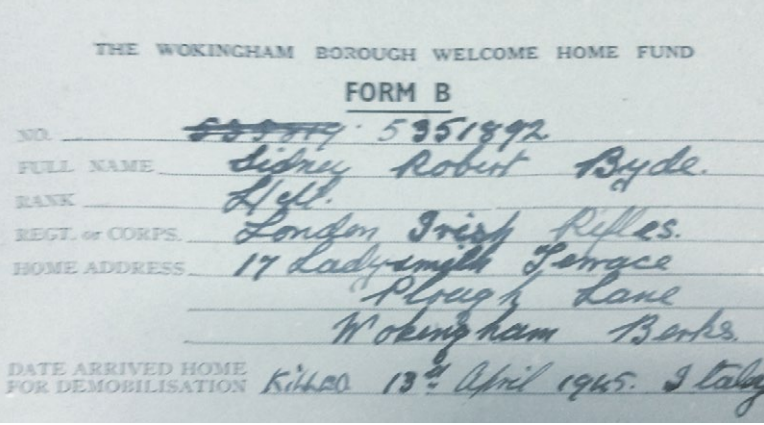
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Victory in Europe: celebrating VE Day

When we reflect on the first VE day celebrations we think of large communal gatherings, feelings of joy, and scenes of wild enthusiasm. Whilst many such street parties took place across the county, there were no official festivities in Wokingham. Crowds gathered spontaneously in the town centre to dance to music played at the Rose Hotel, while in Evendon's Lane one resident brought their piano into the street to provide music. Bonfires were a special thrill for the younger children (born, as the local paper pointed out, into a world of blackouts), and in Rose Street they set an effigy of Hitler on fire. Many celebrated privately within their own homes. Houses were adorned with flags, bunting and streamers which people had been collecting for some weeks in anticipation. Church bells were rung in joy. Local businesses celebrated the lifting of blackout regulations in style by floodlighting their premises.

Some parish councils had discussions on how to formally mark the day with Inkpen and Sunninghill focusing most on those members of society who they thought would benefit most and perhaps remember the time more fondly. The members of Inkpen council unanimously agreed to host a VE Day tea for the 'old people'.

Similarly, the Sunninghill councillors agreed that this was not a time for a large celebration, but rather a time for giving thanks. A thanksgiving church service was arranged for the Sunday following VE Day, and a tea party was provided for the children of the parish. The chairman arranged with the Food Office to supply extra rations to accommodate this. Many other local people were happy to contribute. An anonymous donor provided 'coo' buns free of charge for the tea and the local picture house offered a free cinema show for the children on the same day.

The overall image of VE Day in Berkshire is one of a county in celebration, but overshadowed by continuing fears for those who were still fighting Japan, those who had made the ultimate sacrifice, and the emerging graphic reports of concentration camp atrocities. VJ Day seems to have resulted in less in the way of public rejoicing – this time, perhaps overshadowed by the destruction of Hiroshima.

Sources: D/EX2470/8/8; CPC126/1/4; CPC76/1/2; WO/AZ1/2.

For more, see our online exhibition: throughtheireyesww2.com/ve-day

Welcoming the heroes home

The demobilisation of the armed forces took place over an extended period, as many continued to be needed to control the occupied parts of Germany and Austria. However, the troops and auxiliary personnel such as women's, medical and transport services were welcomed home with joy and gratitude, both by families and sweethearts, and by the community at large. A number of towns and villages set up special Welcome Home Funds, to co-ordinate celebrations, commemorate the service of local people, and show the gratitude of those who had been left at home during the war.

One example is the Wokingham Borough Welcome Home Fund, which sent out cards to every address in the town in 1945 to enquire as to household members' service at any date since 1939. The record cards form a very useful resource for the involvement of Wokingham people in the Second World War. For each man and woman who served, they record service number, name, rank, regiment or corps, and home address. Later the committee added the individual's date of arrival home after demobilisation. Cards were also completed on behalf of men who had been killed or were missing (presumed dead).

Top left: Report of Victory in Europe (WO/AZ1/2)
Top right: One of the Wokingham Welcome Home cards (D/EX2142/2/2/1)





John Wesley's Coat of arms

The Methodist Church

at Caversham Heights
gives thanks to God for your preservation through the perils and hardships of war. We remember your service in the cause of freedom with gratitude and pride. The whole Church welcomes you home and assures you of a place in its fellowship. As part of the family of God we believe we have a special task in the reshaping of the world. If we can help you in settling down we shall be glad; we know you can help us by your experience. We give you welcome and pray God's blessing on your home-coming.

Walter Piggott Minister

Surviving servicemen and women (and the families of those who had been killed) were presented with a leather wallet at a grand ceremony at the Ritz Cinema in Wokingham, on 27 October 1946. Those unable to attend received their wallet later on, on an ad hoc basis, the last being awarded in 1948.

In Sunningwell in north Berkshire, a grand victory day was held on 8 June 1946, over a year after VE Day. In the afternoon there was a sports day and tea party for the village children, followed by a cricket match between a team of ex servicemen and other villagers. The returned soldiers were also invited to a dance in the village hall after the presentation of gifts in the evening.

Source: Records of Wokingham Welcome Home Fund (D/EX2142); Sunningwell Welcome Home Committee (D/P127/28/3)

A new world for the victorious and the vanquished

After the celebrations ended, Berkshire and the world faced an uncertain post-war future. Civil defence works were taken down, air raid shelters converted, and evacuees returned home. Pent-up dissatisfaction led to a landslide victory for the Labour Party in the first post-war General Election, and a mandate for a new Welfare State.

Employment was a worry for many, who had been many years away from their pre-war occupations. In Newbury the first point of enquiry for many was the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB). Examples of their clients were a tobacconist who had shut his shop on joining the RAF; and a butcher's assistant also in the RAF, who wanted to set up in his own right. Both needed premises, which were in short supply. Other men were keen to join the police.

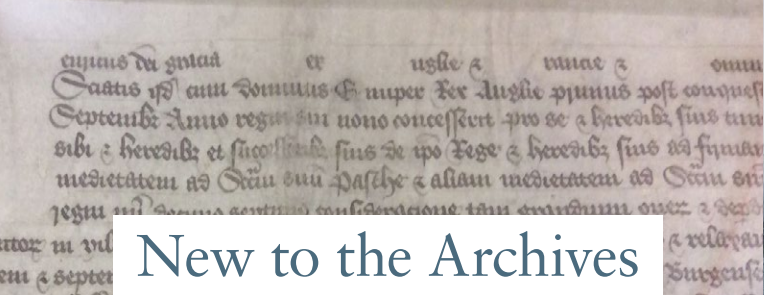
However, there was room for compassion for the youngest victims of the war and its aftermath. Newbury CAB started collecting money for families in the newly liberated parts of Europe. One contributor wrote poignantly in January 1945, 'I do find it difficult without my son here to help, but maybe there are little ones who are in greater need than ourselves'. Half-starved children from the Netherlands, who had spent most of their lives in a country occupied by the Nazis, were welcomed for respite breaks in the town in 1945.

Phoebe Cusden, mayor of Reading 1946-1947, was among the first to pay sympathetic attention to the vanquished enemy, particularly children. As early as September 1945 she drew attention to the plight of abandoned orphans in Germany. In the cold and desperate winter of 1946-7 her Mayor's Winter Collection for German Children and Save Children Now sent food, clothing and toys to German children, and attracted donations from across southern England. In August 1947, two years after the end of the war, Phoebe and her husband Albert (a fluent German speaker) visited the city of Dusseldorf, and began a connection between the two places which endures today.

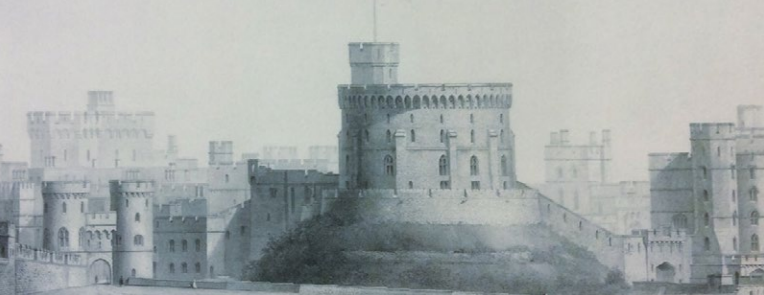
Sources: Newbury CAB records of returning soldiers (N/D59/2/4); papers of Phoebe Cusden (D/EX1485/15/1-2, 4)

Top left: VE Day party in a church hall, Wokingham (WO/Az1/2)
Top right: Prayer card given to returning members of Caversham Heights Methodist Church (D/MS30/8/1)





New to the Archives



Top left: Close up of text of the oldest Windsor charter (WI/C1/1)
Top right: Windsor Castle, from 'Illustrations of Windsor Castle' by Sir Jeffrey Wyattville (WI/D307/1)

Bridges and gin: new light on Windsor

A major recent project, completed just before lockdown, tackled many records from the old Windsor Borough which had been only partially listed. They included records of Windsor Bridge (WI/AB). The bridge carried the main road across the River Thames until it closed to vehicles in 1970. Tolls were controversial, particularly with residents of Eton. Records of elections (WI/AE) include the indentures of election of the great architect Sir Christopher Wren as MP for the borough in 1689, at a time when he is believed to have been working on Windsor Guildhall. This election was annulled, but he did later serve as MP 1690-1693.

An important manorial document, the survey of Windsor Underoure manor, 1605, incorporating copies of earlier surveys dated 1552 and 1584 (WI/AM1/1) is the only known document surviving from the manor. A significant number of deeds and leases of borough property not previously catalogued (WI/AT1/476-511) include the first assignment of the lease of the manor to the borough in 1540, leases of the market tolls, 1637, and Windsor Bridge, 1649-1822. The 1707 and 1736 leases of the bridge includes a schedule of tolls, with a set rate for transporting a hearse with corpse. The 1791 lease includes a provision for the lessees to provide a ferry when the bridge was under repair. Other leases cover the right to fish in the Thames 18 feet either side of the bridge, 1686. There are also deeds of a building in Bier Lane, Clewer, used as a workhouse for weaving, 1709. Another property in Bier Lane had a chequered history including use as a dissenting meeting house (nonconformist church) and a gin distillery. In 1723/4 the borough leased its old town hall and prison to Thomas Humphreys, a local farmer, with a covenant for him to build a new bigger and better prison and provide a keeper for it - an early instance of the privatisation of prisons.

Windsor Castle: royal home and tourist destination

Also of special interest are the contract and specification for the construction of a sewage system for the borough, 1850; accounts of Spital Cemetery, 1891-1919; records of Windsor Voluntary Fire Brigade, 1885-1897; records of Windsor British Schools, 1893-1928; the royal charters of Windsor borough, 1444-1685; Windsor Borough Police constables' declaration book, 1885-1911; and the borough freedom register, 1603-2013 (WI/RF1/1). This continued on after the abolition of the borough in 1974 to become the freedom register for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

A nice album of official photographs, 1934-1963, mainly shows royal visits, but also the presentation of an ambulance by the US Ambassador Joseph Kennedy (father of later US President John F Kennedy) in 1940, the devastating 1947 floods, and the Thames frozen over in the hard winter of 1963.

Some parish records appear to have been deposited with the borough for safe keeping. A really interesting memorandum book from the parish of New Windsor St John the Baptist, 1773-1875 (WI/AP1/1) includes the perambulation of the parish in 1801, and there is also the original parish copy of the Clewer enclosure map and award of 1817 (WI/AP3/1). Other records were donated to the borough, including a lease by James II of Frogmore in Windsor Great Park, 1688 (WI/D303/1); and a map of Eton, 1839 (WI/D305/1). There are a few rare printed books as well; one is a volume of plans of Windsor privately published in 1845, including proposals for an improved layout of roads (WI/D306/1). Another book contains wonderfully detailed drawings and plans of Windsor Castle by Sir Jeffrey Wyattville, the architect who presided over major rebuilding work between 1824 and 1840 (WI/D307/1). There is also a look at early tourism with the manuscript of a never-published guidebook to Windsor aimed at American tourists, 1894-1935 (WI/D308).

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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