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Contents

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Berkshire Local History Association was formed in 1976. Membership is open to individuals, societies and corporate bodies, such as libraries, schools, colleges. The Association covers the whole area of the County of Berkshire, both before and after 1974.

Editor Dr J. Brown. The editorial committee welcomes contributions of articles and reports for inclusion in forthcoming issues of the journal. Please contact Dr Jonathan Brown, 15 Instow Road, Reading, RG6 5QH (email journal@blha.org.uk) for guidance on length and presentation before submitting a contribution. The editor's judgement on all matters concerning the acceptance, content and editing of articles is final.

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The Association would like to express its thanks to all those who helped by assisting with the various stages of producing this issue of the journal.

Cover illustrations
Front: Reading Abbey ruins 2018. The records of the abbey are the subject of the latest volume published by Berkshire Record Society.
Back: Abingdon workhouse: top, from *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction*, 27 February 1836; bottom, from the 25-inch Ordnance Survey map. Bap reproduced courtesy of Reading Borough Libraries.

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Local History in Berkshire

Brian Boulter, David Cliffe, E. J. T. Collins

The Association's 2017 A.G.M. in Newbury was our fortieth. It was the meeting at which our President of 19 years' standing, Professor E. J. T. Collins, retired, and Brian Boulter, who had been a member of the Association since its inception, took over the reins for the year 2017-18. Instead of a traditional presidential address, it was decided to ask both the incoming and the outgoing presidents each to give a short talk about local history in the county, concentrating on the last forty years. David Cliffe, as chairman, would join them, to present the picture from his perspective as a librarian in Reading, retiring in 2011 as Local Studies Manager, a post which sadly no longer exists. Each spoke for 15-20 minutes.

After the meeting, it was suggested that the talks should be written up, and published in *Berkshire Old and New*, and that they might be amalgamated, avoiding repetition and drawing the themes together in a logical, if not exactly chronological order. With the consent of the two presidents, David Cliffe attempted to do this. After examining trends and changes over time, the article looks more particularly at the roles of the Reading Central Library, the Berkshire Record Office, and our own Association in bringing about these changes. The story that emerges, though similar to that told in other counties, is very much one that relates specifically to Berkshire – old and new.

Back in the days of Queen Victoria, one can imagine antiquaries, sitting in the studies of their manor houses, vicarages and rectories, surrounded by their estate papers and the contents of their parish chests. Many 'working' people could not read or write; the notion of 'leisure' time would have been foreign to them, so that even if there had been freely available public repositories for books and manuscripts, they would have been of little use. So it is not surprising that the old local histories are mainly concerned with the landowning families and the church, and hardly at all with the people who worked on the land or in the mills, factories, forges, quarries, and mines.

Later in the nineteenth century, local societies with an interest in their locality were formed, and an infrastructure began to develop. Membership of the societies was middle class and male in the first place, but eventually it gradually widened. The first in Berkshire seems to have been the Newbury District Field Club, founded in 1870. It issued its *Transactions* from 1872 onwards, and it continues to thrive and to publish. In 1871, the Berkshire Archaeological Society was founded. Reading Borough opened its public

library and museum in 1883, and the Reading University Extension College, which was to become the University of Reading, opened in 1893.

A major landmark for Berkshire local history was the *Victoria History of the County of Berkshire,* edited by Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, Rector of Barkham, and William Page. It appeared in four volumes, between 1906 and 1924, with a separate index volume. It came fairly early in the series, so the emphasis is still on the church and the manor, but there is much else besides, with copious references to sources and a good index. It remains an excellent source for manorial history and the history of land ownership. Some counties are still not covered in the series.

The 1920s and '30s, for the fortunate, were a time of increasing leisure and holidays with pay, when people were getting out and about by car and bicycle, and going hiking. Guide books by authors such as H. V. Morton proliferated, telling their readers what to see.

But local history as we now know it was still in its infancy, and was primarily concerned with the great institutions – church, manor, judicial system and defence, and, at a popular level with customs and curiosities. There was a certain interest shown by local libraries, with some of them, such as Reading, collecting and conserving records. As late as 1939, just a handful of county record offices existed across the country. Heavily rooted in antiquarianism, and overshadowed by archaeology and natural history, local history still lacked presence.

It eventually found a niche outside academia. There was, and still is, only one university department of local history, at Leicester. In most university departments of history, English local history is not part of the formal curriculum, and some still regard it with disdain. It is sometimes taught in primary schools, but seldom in secondary schools.

After the war, the 1950s-60s saw a mushrooming of societies of all sorts, of county record offices, specialist libraries and museums, houses open to the public, and university extramural departments providing expert instruction on the use of sources and supervising group research. There was a new approach to the writing of local (and national) history. This was the age of the 'common man' and of history that was 'bottom up' rather than 'head down', reflecting everyday life. At the same time, local history wasn't just a matter of collecting facts, but about analysis and interpretation. And it was the improvements in the infrastructure – libraries and record offices in the first place, to be followed by microforms and then electronic databases – which made this possible.

Local history also became less blinkered and desk-bound. W. G. Hoskins encouraged people to go out and look at landscapes, and to use maps to interpret them. Michael Rix coined the term 'industrial archaeology', saying that the remains of mills and mines were as important as those of castles and abbeys. Groups were formed to photograph, measure, record, and to

study the documentary sources. Locally, we have the Berkshire Industrial Archaeology Group, Reading Museum, the Museum of English Rural Life, the Mills Archive and the Wessex Film and Sound Archive at Winchester, which have all been active in collecting local history.

The Local Government Act of 1972 led to a change in the boundaries between Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire, coming into effect in 1974. The old towns of Abingdon, Wallingford and Wantage found themselves in Oxfordshire, and by way of compensation, Berkshire was given Eton, Slough and Langley, drastically altering the shape and nature of the county. The Berkshire Record Office retained the records for the old county, and management of the library services across the county was transferred from the borough councils to the new County Council.

There was a second upheaval for libraries and for the Record Office in 1998. For arcane political reasons, the government decided that it would abolish Berkshire County Council. Following a public consultation, it was declared that the county would be administered by six unitary authorities – an experiment not inflicted on any other county, and not one of the options proposed in the public consultation document. All services run by local authorities are now suffering from reductions in funding from the central government. Users look forward in the hope that the lean times must soon come to an end.

Another disappointment in recent years was the decision of Reading University to close its Department of Continuing Education in 2009. This meant the closure of local history courses – a loss which has to some extent been mitigated by the W.E.A. and Oxford University Department of Continuing Education.

But all has not been doom and gloom. The Berkshire Record Society, founded in 1993, arrived rather late among county societies publishing printed editions of important historical documents. It has now published 21 volumes, including *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire*, with an expanded second edition of the same title in 2012, edited by Joan Dils and Margaret Yates, both of them BLHA Vice-Presidents. The Association has been happy to support two of the Society's research projects so far, and has just agreed to support a third.

The technological revolution has proved a great boon, and, at the same time, a challenge. It has affected the ways in which local historians access information and communicate with one another. The internet, and computers in libraries and at home, mean that there is access to a wide range of historical sources, many of them hitherto unknown to all but subject experts. From microfiche and microfilm, we are migrating towards online access. The census returns, 1841-1911, are available on line (and on subscription), as are some local newspapers. Increasingly, the catalogues of The National Archives at Kew, and of individual county record offices, are

available, as are the catalogues of public and university libraries, and, on a more modest scale, the Association's Berkshire Bibliography.

Reading Public Library

Reading, the county town of Berkshire, agreed to support a public library rather late in the day. It opened in 1883, and was soon building up a county-wide collection of local history material. Some of it was purchased, and some acquired through gifts and bequests. Printed catalogues and supplements appeared, and in the Central Library itself was a sheaf catalogue, from which readers had to select items. The 'sheaves' were bundles of typewritten slips, held in fifty or so binders. The collection itself was on closed access – one ordered an item, and a member of staff went and got it. Much material was in the vaults under the Town Hall, but some of the large bound volumes of newspapers were in other buildings, which included the old mortuary in Star Lane.

By the 1970s the Victorian buildings designed by Alfred Waterhouse and Thomas Lainson were poorly maintained and infested with mice and cockroaches. The Borough Council had hoped to sell them off for redevelopment, and to move the library and museum to a 'cultural centre' near the new civic offices. The 1974 local government changes meant that this was not to be. After looking at various sites for a new central library, the County Council decided on a piece of land it had acquired for a new road, but then decided not to proceed with, near Jackson's Corner, on the edge of the town centre.

In the new building, opened in 1985, the Local Studies Collection was shoe-horned in with the Reference Library. Much of the stock was at last on open access, and items which were too precious to be on open shelves were visible in glass cases. All of the books available for loan were on the computer catalogue, as was recently acquired material, but there was a vast backlog of older books to be added. The maps, prints, photographs, drawings and ephemera were not catalogued at all. In 1994 the collection moved to the top floor, where there was room for more open access, and more seating.

The demise of the County Council in 1998 meant that responsibility for the library was transferred back to Reading Borough Council, and staff were redeployed. The time was found to allow all the books and pamphlets to be catalogued, and for a start to be made on adding the prints, photographs and drawings, and making digital images viewable from the website. The cataloguing of books and pamphlets was completed: the work on images continues, using volunteers. Reductions in funding have meant that the collection moved down to the second floor, which it shares with music, drama and the arts. It was impossible to staff an additional floor just for local studies, and there are times when there is no member of staff sitting

behind the desk on the second floor, but the amount of floor space is still more than adequate.

The Berkshire Record Office

The first county record office was established by Bedfordshire County Council as long ago as 1913, along the lines of the Public Record Office in London. Eventually every county would have one, but it took many years. They were the depositories for the records of county councils, but eventually became recognised as the home for church records, borough records, the records of businesses and societies, and so forth. The Berkshire office was established in 1948. The search room was in the basement of the former County Police Station in Abbey Street, Reading. It was cramped and dismal. Records were stored under the adjacent assize courts and the shire hall, and some materials were inaccessible when the court was in session.

In the 1970s, new county council offices were proposed on the old Abbey Wharf, off King's Road, just east of central Reading, but in the end it was decided to move all the county offices out of town to new buildings at Shinfield Park, about four miles away. The new Shire Hall was ready in 1981, and facilities at the new record office were vastly improved. Even so, the acquisition of important new collections of documents, and the phenomenal growth of interest in family history, meant that expansion within Shire Hall was soon necessary.

When the County Council was abolished in 1998 there was a further move. The old 'ceremonial county' needed a record office, and the six unitary authorities which succeeded it had to share the cost. Reading Borough provided the land, at the top of Castle Hill and about half a mile from the town centre, and the present building opened early in 2000. It is purpose-built, standing in the grounds of Yeomanry House (currently the Register Office), and has ample car parking.

Despite financial constraints, the Record Office continues to acquire important collections of documents, and is adept at attracting additional funding to pay for their cataloguing and conservation, whilst keeping the search room open and maintaining the enquiry service.

The Berkshire Local History Association

The BLHA stemmed in part from the Berkshire Local History Recording Scheme, which was instigated in 1924, largely through the efforts of an architect with the resounding name of Conrad Birdwood Willcocks. Correspondents from each of the 203 parishes in the county were invited to submit their records. The value of this kind of collecting was by no means generally acknowledged in the early days. The Berkshire Local History Committee, which ran the Recording Scheme, in a letter of 1947, reported

that 'When first set up, it was thought that as the records were the work of amateurs, they would be mostly valueless, but it was believed by the committee that if correspondents were sufficiently interested in recording the facts, they would do so reasonably well, and this has proved the case.' The use of the word 'reasonably' seems particularly telling here!

The records in question were written or pasted onto sheets of paper of uniform size, so as to fit into large 'Kalamazoo' albums which could be loosened to allow the insertion of new pages wherever appropriate. Arranged alphabetically by parish, there were records of many kinds – lists of place and field names, photographs of old cottages, market crosses, stocks and sundials, records of local customs, fairs, legends and weather lore, biographies of local worthies, and the transcriptions of inscriptions on tombstones. Inevitably, some of what was recorded will no longer be extant. Some of the correspondents were more assiduous than others.

Two copies of each record were produced: one went to the public library in Reading, where you can still find it, and another was offered to the British Museum Library. It wasn't wanted at Bloomsbury, so the second set of albums was deposited at the Berkshire Record Office.

They are still worth consulting. Under the Parish of Cookham, for example, 244 church monuments are recorded. There are notes on the Cookham Rise County Modern School. And under 'A' for 'Apparitions' is the story of the gentleman who, while walking from Pinkneys Green to Cookham Dean, saw in the sky 'a great mountain with troops, mules, and artillery, toiling up a mountain pass. It was visible in the sky for several minutes', and he made a note of the day and the time, subsequently to discover that this was the time when Napoleon's troops were crossing the Alps!

Another development leading to the foundation of our Association was the National Council of Social Service, which established the Standing Conference for Local History in 1948. From then onwards, counties began to set up affiliated local history associations. The Standing Conference was eventually replaced by the British Association for Local History, to which BLHA is affiliated. It is not without significance that the Standing Conference journal changed its name from *The Amateur Historian* to *The Local Historian*. The Berkshire Local History Association took over the work of the Berkshire Local History Committee in 1976. This was rather late when compared with other English counties.

Profesor Ted Collins recalled that when he took over as President from Alan Rogers, the Association was in good heart. A survey in 1991, conducted by Brian Boulter, reported that there were then 24 affiliated local societies and 11 institutions – libraries, museums, and the Record Office. Between them, 200 meetings had been held over the year, and combined

membership was around 2,500. [Today, there are 37 affiliated local societies, 23 institutions and 88 individual members.]

David Cliffe recalled how, in 2002, he had been persuaded by Pat and Jim Smart to join the editorial panel of *Berkshire Old and New*. There were long meetings, sometimes at Judith Hunter's house near Slough, and every article was gone through in great detail. At the time, the editor of the journal did not sit on the executive committee, and so a liaison officer was appointed, in the figure of Vincent Millett. Things are done differently these days – the editor does sit on the committee, and under Jonathan Brown's editorship the team of readers is still involved, but much of the communication is done by email.

It was in 2009 that David was invited to stand as Chairman of the Association, taking over from Joan Dils. He remembered protesting that he wasn't a member of the Association, certainly hadn't served on the executive committee, and didn't much like committee meetings anyway. Joan and Margaret Simons used all their powers of persuasion, and after talking things through over a few drinks, David agreed.

The first committee meeting was attended by a very disparate collection of people, some of whom seemed to be there because they liked one another, or liked going to meetings. He remembered with affection Michael Bayley, who never said much, but would look at people intently round the table. This was a bit disconcerting until he saw that Michael was actually drawing portraits of the committee members! It was, and still is, a relatively small number of people who work to keep the Association going. But the work is rewarding, and being as part of a team can be very fulfilling.

The Association has achieved a great deal. For £9 a year, members have a copy of *Berkshire Old and New,* three newsletters, occasional email bulletins with more local history news, a website, occasional visits and study days, and an AGM, which moves around the county and usually involves a talk and a local history walk. We give assistance to local historians in their research, and in getting their finished work published. The symposium held in St. Laurence's Church in honour of Joan Dils in 2015 was a particularly memorable event, which resulted in an excellent publication.

Our first 40 years have seen many dedicated people involved, and gradual progress. Let us hope that many more with an interest in Berkshire local history will come forward and play their part in ensuring that we have a useful and thriving Association in 40 years' time!

Abingdon Workhouse: the Last Christmas Day

John Dunleavy

It is Christmas Day in the workhouse,
And the cold, bare walls are bright
With garlands and greens and holly,
And the place is a pleasant sight;
For with clean-washed hands and faces,
In a long and hungry line
The paupers sit at the table,
For this is the hour they dine.[1]

Peter Higginbotham, in his monumental work, *The Workhouse Encyclopedia,* states the workhouse was an institution, funded from the local poor rate, voluntarily entered into, where the destitute were housed and maintained, usually with an obligation upon inmates to perform labour according to the capability of each individual.[2]

At Abingdon a union workhouse had been built and opened its doors to those prepared to accept the conditions laid down by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Abingdon was in fact a pioneer in implementing the legislation, the forbidding-looking building on Oxford Road providing a reminder of the fate likely to befall anyone who was judged to be destitute, or unable to support themselves. While no report on the actual opening of the workhouse has been located, an illustration appeared in a contemporary journal, *The Mirror,* published in 1836. The design was by a newly-qualified architect, Sampson Kempthorne, whose plans found favour with the Poor Law Commissioners, and who went on to furnish plans for a number of workhouses. Close on a century later, when the decision to close the workhouse had been taken, there were no commemoration ceremonies either. Yet a local weekly reminded readers that the closure was tinged with an element of sadness, since the inmates were all to be transferred to the Institution at Wallingford. Seemingly their affinity with Abingdon was of no account; what had once been the county town of Berkshire was to lose yet another agency. Abingdonians generally complained at what amounted to a further diminution in the dignity and status of what had formerly been the county's principal town.[3]

In 1931 the closure of the workhouse attracted the attention of the local press, *The Herald* carrying a detailed account of the customary Christmas dinner along with a few other relaxations permitted to the inmates from the

irksome rules during yuletide. On Boxing Day the band of the Salvation Army presented a concert of seasonal music, after which the inmates were advised to gather their few belongings together and prepare to travel to Wallingford, the Institution there having undergone some alterations. Henceforth the provision of housing, clothing and feeding of the poor of Abingdon and Wallingford devolved upon the Public Assistance Committee Institution. The framers of the Local Government Act in 1929 maintained that the new arrangements would put an end to the stigma of the workhouse, replacing it with a more humane system. In future the building known as the workhouse, the centre-piece of the 1834 system, was restyled 'the Institution.' Yet for many years the term workhouse was a feature of common currency. It was to take much more than a piece of legislation to destroy the popular perceptions of the poor law.[4]

Long before George Sims published his poetic effusion in 1877, the need for some changes had already become apparent. The Poor Law Commission, the government agency responsible for the nearly 600 unions in England and Wales formed after 1834, was aware the suggested reforms were never likely to be fully implemented. For instance, ignoring the plan to segregate what were termed the four classes of pauper: the aged, the children, able-bodied females and able-bodied males in separate institutions, the guardians of the public purse in most areas were content to provide what came to be known as a 'general mixed workhouse,' a single establishment serving the whole union.

Initially it looked as though Abingdon, having accepted what appeared to be an enlightened design for a new workhouse from a young architect, was keen on implementing the principles set out by the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Such was not the case, instead of introducing specialist departments the area was to be served by an institution to serve paupers generally. The elderly, the unemployed, the sick and orphans, were obliged to submit to the rules and regulations on entering the edifice on Oxford Road. While the Guardians were considered by many to be hard-hearted, indifferent to the plight of the poor, it ought to be remembered that the number of applicants for help and the inmate population could never be predicted with any accuracy. Numbers tended to fluctuate wildly, determined often by the season.[5]

Responsibility for the everyday operation of 'the house', as it was commonly known, was vested in the officers, who were enjoined to ensure the inmates were well behaved, and were prepared to accept the restricted and plain diet laid down by the Commissioners in London. The chief officer was the Master, who was assisted by a Matron (often his wife), a Medical Officer, and a chaplain, while numerous other chores were delegated to inmates. Criticism of the system came from many quarters, Charles Dickens being among the more prominent of these. The building in Oxford Road,

despite complaints, served as the symbol of the union for close on a century. Despite calls for an overhaul of the ways in which paupers were treated, it was not until 1929 that legislation was introduced designed to sweep away the workhouse.

Yet there had been significant improvements in respect of diet, medical care, the treatment of infants and the mentally ill; the introduction of schemes such as old age pensions and national insurance had done a great deal to improve the welfare of the working population and the elderly. Fewer were now dependent on the workhouse: even so, the deterrent idea, introduced in 1834, still persisted. A short stay in the workhouse carried with it a social stigma; the house was a place to dread.[6]

Regardless of whether applicants for relief were prepared to enter the workhouse for a long or a short stay, they had to submit to a set of regulations. Inmates were obliged to agree to take a bath, wear clothing owned by the institute, and accept the diet devised for paupers. They were set tasks of work – a labour test. The labour test in the case of a female was frequently of a domestic nature – cooking, sewing, cleaning, caring for the sick or children – while men might be given a manual task, such as gardening, or caring for domestic animals, the produce keeping the food bill lower than it might otherwise be. At Abingdon the long-serving Master, Richard Ellis, was proud of the market garden he developed, a source of food for the inmates and a means of raising revenue for the workhouse. Ellis also informed the London-based Poor Law Board of his success in raising pigs. He stated there was something like ten acres of land by the workhouse where he was able to keep his charges occupied, and that they were clearly happy to be in the open air. Any problems that might arise frequently led to the troublesome paupers being assigned to indoor tasks where they could be supervised much more strictly.[7]

The number of people coming within the orbit of the poor law depended on a number of factors. Not all applicants were prepared to enter the workhouse for a lengthy period, being content merely to secure a place to spend the night in what was termed the casual ward, and on the following day–in return for satisfying a labour task–accept a breakfast before setting out on the road for the next port of call. This category of pauper was known as a wayfarer or tramp, men, mainly, who had no regular work and who liked to roam the country. When the Abingdon workhouse was opened in 1835, it was stated that accommodation was sufficient for some 380; later, in 1849, Ellis reckoned there were about 200 paupers being cared for. In 1931 the Berkshire County Council Finance Committee received a report on the Abingdon workhouse stating numbers had dwindled to approximately seventy-four.[8]

A number of public holidays, such as Easter and Whitsun, came to be celebrated generally during the nineteenth century, and on these occasions

the rules of institutions were frequently relaxed. The menu served at mealtimes was usually enhanced, after which the workhouse gates were usually thrown open, allowing the inmates several hours of liberty. Some took the opportunity to call on relatives or friends, while other inmates simply welcomed the opportunity to revisit old haunts.[9]

The decision to close the Abingdon Institution and transfer the inmates to Wallingford was taken as a consequence of the Local Government Act 1929. Two separate areas or unions were merged into one. Enquirers were informed the merger of the two unions had been taken on the grounds of economy. Smaller institutions, it was maintained, were no longer viable economically. What was more, the Abingdon Institution was regarded as being no longer fit for purpose: neglect of regular maintenance was reflected in the deteriorating fabric. There was some debate locally as to whether the building might not be adapted for health or welfare purposes, though this seems not to have been taken seriously in view of the state of the building.

The last few days of the Abingdon Institute were taken up with the customary arrangements for Christmas.[10] The day opened with those who wished attending Holy Communion in St Margaret's Church, the place of worship provided for inmates. The church, located in workhouse grounds, was destined to close with the Institute. The chaplain, Rev. R. C. MacKeowen, accompanied the mayor and mayoress (Mr and Mrs F. Gibson), Councillor J. D. Godfrey (a former mayor), and Messrs Budd and Hanks, representatives of the Royal Antedeluvian Order of Buffaloes (RAOB), made a tour of the main building.[11]

Policy-makers in the relevant government department permitted extra spending at Christmas to provide inmates with a celebratory meal, and that set for 1932 was no exception. The Christmas dinner consisted of roast beef, roast pork, baked potatoes and green vegetables, Christmas pudding and custard, with beer and mineral waters to drink. The annual appeal to local people to provide extras at Christmas was well responded to, the local press informing readers that Mrs Baillie had brought fruit and tobacco, while Mrs Tatham provided oranges. The evergreen decorations festooning the hall had been donated by Mrs Badcock. The local lodge of Buffaloes thoughtfully provided not just a barrel of beer, but mineral waters and toys for the children.[12]

The closure of the Abingdon Institution involved not only the removal of the inmates to that at Wallingford, but the loss of a number of remunerated posts held by the officers. The latter had their own farewell function, with speeches and presentations. While several made no secret of the fact they regretted the closing of the Institution, they had the satisfaction of being awarded compensation for loss of posts. On Boxing Day the inmates, just hours before their departure for Wallingford, were entertained by the band from the local citadel of the Salvation Army. This proved to be the last such

function at the former Abingdon workhouse. The building and grounds were offered for sale by tender, a bid made by a Coventry developer being accepted. Within a short space of time the site was cleared for housing; what was dubbed locally as the workhouse estate consisted of detached and semi-detached units, the only reminder of the original building being the retention of a section of the workhouse wall running alongside the recreation ground in Boxhill Road.[13]

The Times published on 31 March 1931 reminded its readers that the disappearance of the poor law system constituted a memorable landmark in our local history. In fact from early in the century the pace of social reform had been gathering momentum. The appointment of a Royal Commission in 1905 to study the poor law and make recommendations signified that government was prepared to look afresh at a system designed for another age. Those anticipating a comprehensive reform such as the substitution of the poor law with an entirely new agency were to be disappointed. Those hoping for change had to be content with a series of instalments such as old age pensions, a national insurance scheme, trade boards and labour exchanges. These represented a significant step forward and in retrospect led ultimately to the establishment of the welfare state. Locally, reformers could point to the appearance of several agencies that took over services that originally came within the remit of the poor law. A glance at the local directory lists not only a cottage hospital, but one to care for patients designated isolation or 'fever' cases, and there was another for tuberculosis sufferers. It took another war to finally put an end to the poor law system. The disruption to the lives of millions caused by the war led to a lengthy, though informed debate about the need for a nation-wide comprehensive welfare system, provided in response to need rather than attachment to a particular district or having the means to pay. Much of the credit for the post-war reforms–usually designated the welfare state–has gone to William Beveridge, yet people from all parties made significant contributions. Some analysts have maintained that the result of the 1945 election was determined by the voters casting their votes in favour of a welfare state. The harsh, cruel workhouse system depicted by Sims was finally laid to rest. Post-war Britain was a very different society and the vestiges of the poor law system finally disappeared.[14]

If Charles Dickens may be considered to be pre-eminent among the band of prose writers who employed the pen to bring about reforms in our social system, George Sims deserves to be among those who compiled poetry in the lengthy campaign for the same good cause. Not that radical change came overnight. Researchers maintain that reforms to the personnel, the buildings, and above all old attitudes towards the treatment of the poor took time to be fully implemented. The Institution, for instance, despite being relabelled, continued to be referred to by many as 'the house,'

'the grubber', 'the spike' and other such designations. Members of the Public Assistance Committees were in many cases the same people who had served on the former Boards of Guardians. Officials employed at the newly established Institutions were often the same people who had managed the workhouses. It would take patience and time for the great and the good to alter their perceptions when dealing with those in the community. Having for so long treated inmates as paupers, henceforth they had to regarded as patients or residents in an institution committed to treating the residents with respect.[15]

References

1 G. R. Sims, a poem first published in *The Referee,* Christmas 1877, reprinted in *The Dragonet Ballads* (1881). Sims, a popular author and journalist, penned his Christmas day poem while he was still grieving the loss of his wife. He believed both she and the family had been badly treated by officialdom.
2 P. Higginbotham, *The Workhouse Encyclopedia* (2012) p. 65. Historians are indebted to Norman Longmate for his comprehensive study of *The Workhouse: a social history* (2003), a work that has run into several editions. M. J. Thomas, *Abingdon in camera. Portrait of a country town 1850-1950* (1978) plate 95. See also http://www.workhouses.org.uk.
3 *The Mirror of Literature, amusement and instruction,* 27 February 1836. R. Wildman, 'Appendix: Workhouse Architecture,' in Longmate, *The Workhouse,* pp. 288-91. *Reading Mercury,* 2 January 1932.
4 N. Hammond, *The book of Abingdon* (1979) p. 63. *North Berks Herald,* 1 January 1932. *Reading Mercury,* 2 January 1932.
5 Higginbotham, *Encyclopedia,* pp. 296-9. J. Walker, *British Economic and Social History* (1968) pp. 183-9.
6 P. Higginbotham, *Voices from the Workhouse* (2012) Part 2, passim. The Local Government Act as applied to the poor law took effect on 1 April 1930. It took some time before all the changes envisaged by the Act were implemented.
7 P. Higginbotham, *Voices,* pp. 89-91.
8 Ibid. *Berkshire County Council, Minutes 1932* (1932) pp. 214, 494.
9 P. Horn, *The Victorian and Edwardian Schoolchild* (2010) ch. 5 *passim.* M. J. Wells-Gardner, 'Growing up in the workhouse,' in Higginbotham, *Voices,* pp. 107-14.
10 *Reading Mercury,* 8 August, 5 December 1931. The Local Government Act 1929, framed by Neville Chamberlain (then Minister of Health), transferred all the assets and functions of the Poor Law system to county and county borough councils. Dennis Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (2001) pp.14-15.
11 *North Berks Herald,* 1 January 1933. The local press informed readers of similar visits performed by civic and community leaders during the festive season.
12 Ibid.
13 M. J. Thomas, *Abingdon in camera,* plates 94, 95. *Berkshire County Council Minutes*, vol. 35 (1932) pp. 489-90.
14 *The Times,* 31 March 1931. *Kelly's Directory of Berkshire* (1931) p. 22.

15 The works of two contemporary social investigators are worth consulting: Frank Gray, *The tramp. His meaning and being* (1931) and P. Davison (ed.), *George Orwell, The Orwell Diaries* (London, 2010) pp. 1-22.

The Rise and Fall of the Berkshire Musical Festivals (1806-1846)

Gordon Cox

On Thursday 6 October 1842, J. W. Davison ('J.W.D'), a correspondent of *The Musical World* and later music critic of *The Times*, arrived by train at Reading station at 11.30am. The purpose of his trip was to attend the Berkshire Musical Festival in the Town Hall. It happened to be a fine day. He chose to come for a number of reasons: Reading, in his opinion, was 'one of the prettiest places in England'; the music to be played was attractive; and one or two of his favourite performers were to be featured. Disembarking from the train he found that crowds of people were parading Friar Street, so that every avenue to the Town Hall was blocked. When he eventually entered, he could scarcely find standing room: 'the whole scene was in the highest degree exciting and brilliant.'[1]

The Berkshire Musical Festival was part of a larger provincial movement in the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England. In her authoritative history, Pippa Drummond points out that such festivals 'were the most significant cultural events to be held in provincial England during the nineteenth century.'[2] The best known and earliest example is the Three Choirs Festival which still rotates between Gloucester, Hereford and Worcester. The earliest documentary evidence relating to it dates from 1719.[3] Subsequently the important Handel Commemorations in Westminster Abbey in 1784, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, acted as a catalyst for major festivals throughout the towns and cities of the country, including Birmingham, Chester, Norwich, Salisbury and York, to name but a few. Most of them were ambitious in scope, employing the leading singers and instrumentalists of the time. They required considerable advance planning, fixing dates, engaging conductors and performers, deciding on programmes etc. Hence the realisation that it was impractical to hold such festivals every year or even biennially. Most were held triennially. The majority of festivals ceased with the onset of World War One, before being revived in some cases after the conflict.

In this article I focus upon the thirteen Berkshire Musical Festivals that were organised every three or four years in Reading between 1806 and 1846, paying special attention to the repertoire, the performers and the audience. To conclude I discuss some of the reasons for their discontinuance, and also their achievements. But first I will discuss the central contribution of the Binfield family of Reading to the development of the Berkshire Musical Festivals over this stretch of forty years.

Richard Binfield and his family

Richard Binfield (1766-1839) was the driving force behind the festival in Reading. Few details of his early life are available, but he established the Binfield Musical Warehouse in 1799, first in Broad Street, then in Friar Street in Reading (at the intersection with Cross Street). Five years later he was appointed the organist of St Laurence's Church, originally founded by Reading Abbey for the townspeople in the twelfth century. Binfield held this position until his death.

In one of the Reading trade directories of 1830 Richard is listed both under 'musical instrument sellers' and 'professors and teachers of music'.[4] An advertisement in 1835 listed the range of products on offer at 'Mr Binfield's Music Warehouse, Friar Street'. There was a variety of organs, pianofortes, 'a very fine Seraphine'[5] and harps for sale, besides 'the most fashionable music' including Bellini's opera *I Puritani*. The business also provided for the tuning and repair of musical instruments.[6] Richard was active as a piano teacher, and in this regard announced on 26 July 1819 his plans to open an academy based upon 'Mr Logier's New System of Musical Education', an innovative method intended to facilitate group teaching.[7] He also published teaching materials for use with juvenile performers. The Warehouse additionally housed a music circulating library. Richard's crowning achievement, however, was the Berkshire Musical Festival which he directed between 1806 and 1839 (the year of his death).

Richard and his wife Ann had nine children. Their second son, John Bilson Binfield (1805-1875), and their youngest daughter, Hannah Rampton Binfield (1809-1887), both played leading roles in the festival. John was organist at St Giles' Church in Reading and was referred to in the directories as a 'professor of music'.[8] Between 1842 and 1844 he directed an ambitious programme of teaching adults to sing at sight, based upon the teaching method of John Hullah (1812-1884).[9] On his father's death he directed the two last Berkshire Musical Festivals in 1842 and 1846. Hannah was an excellent organist, pianist and harpist, and was frequently a soloist at the festivals. She was a published composer of songs and instrumental solos and succeeded her father, on his death, as organist of St Laurence's church.[10] Hannah also took charge of the Musical Warehouse, with her sister Louisa.

The following list provides the years in which the thirteen Berkshire Musical Festivals took place together with the date(s) of each one placed in parentheses: 1806 (2 October), 1810 (12-13 September), 1813 (6 October), 1816 (2 October), 1819 (15-17 September), 1822 (28-30 August), 1825 (30 August), 1828 (21 October), 1831 (19 October), 1835 (8 October), 1839 (23 September), 1842 (6 October), 1846 (6 October). The typical festival schedule, in Berkshire and elsewhere, consisted of performances of sacred works in the morning, followed by concerts of miscellaneous vocal and

instrumental items in the evening. There was thus a distinction between the sacred and the secular. In Reading this was emphasised in the separate locations for the event up until 1831, with the morning devoted to sacred music in St Laurence's Church, and in the evening a secular concert in the Reading Town Hall. The last four festivals severed the link with St Laurence's Church, and the Town Hall replaced it as the sole venue. An important part of the festivals were the social events that were included, most notably the balls that followed the evening concerts.

Whilst the first event in 1806 was called the Reading Musical Festival, subsequently they were referred to variously as The Berkshire Musical Festivals, The Grand Berkshire Musical Festivals, and sometimes as the Berkshire Triennial Musical Festivals. There were two exceptions in 1813 and 1816 when the one-day festivals were called 'Sacred Music'. However in every other respect they followed the established format, with the morning performance in the church and the evening secular concert and ball in the Town Hall.

It should be noted that there was often a debate nationally over the number of days a festival should last. Although one-day festivals did exist (as in the majority of the Berkshire festivals), the more prestigious lasted for three days, giving scope for six or seven concerts. Richard Binfield achieved the three-day festival model on two occasions in 1819 and 1822.

The Repertoire of the Berkshire Musical Festivals

The morning concerts featuring sacred music generally commenced at 11.30 am or midday, and finished between 2.30pm. and 3.45pm. They were frequently in three parts: main work; Handel organ concerto; final selections. There was a particular focus on the oratorios of Handel (1685-1759), and more specifically on his *Messiah*. First performed in Dublin in 1742, by the 1760s it had become almost a cultural icon. As a compendium of basic Christianity it appealed to the prevailing religious atmosphere of the time. It became in Dave Russell's words 'the object of special devotion'.[11]

In the first of Richard Binfield's festivals in 1806, *Messiah* comprised the whole of the morning session, and there were further performances of the full work in 1810, 1819, 1822, and 1839. Of interest is that, from 1819, it was the version arranged by Mozart in 1789 that was used. His transcription introduced a significant amount of extra wind music to the score, including the addition of clarinets. When there was not a full performance of *Messiah,* selections from it were always included. The only other Handel oratorio which was performed in full was *Judas Maccabaeus* on two occasions. At other times there were numerous extracts performed from Handel's extensive output of oratorios, including *Esther, Jephtha* and *Samson*. Selections from Haydn's *The Creation* (1797), which had been much

influenced by Handel and his success with *Messiah*, were regularly featured in the festivals.

There was a considerable number of contemporary oratorios, now forgotten, from which selections were performed, including Bochsa's *The Deluge*, Neukomm's *Prophecy of Babylon*, Crotch's *Palestine,* and John Bilson Binfield's *The Martyr of Antioch*. Binfield's work, in manuscript, set words by a prominent Reading churchman, the vicar of St Mary's Butts, Rev. Henry Millman. The local paper commented: 'The accompaniments show a command of the orchestra highly commendable in so young a composer as Mr Binfield, who we believe is not yet twenty years of age.'[12] A work somewhat removed from the oratorio tradition, Rossini's *Stabat Mater* was performed in full at the penultimate festival in 1842. It was sung in English rather than Latin, 'so as not to offend protestant sensibilities'.[13] It apparently created 'more excitement than any production which has appeared for years'.[14]

The evening events were usually called GRAND MISCELLANEOUS CONCERTS. They commenced at 7.30pm or 8.00pm in the Town Hall. Predominantly secular in nature they included symphonies or overtures, concertos, some chamber music, solo instrumental and vocal items.

The first festival concert began and ended with symphonies by Haydn and Mozart. Later concerts included popular overtures by such composers as Auber (*Masaniello*), Beethoven (*Fidelio* and *Prometheus*), Cherubini (*Anacreon*), Mendelssohn (*Midsummer Night's Dream*), Mozart (*Die Zauberflöte, Don Giovanni*), Rossini (*L'Italiana in Algeri*), Weber (*Der Freischütz*).

One of the features of such concerts on the provincial festival circuit was a concerto written and performed by the composer, who also happened to be a principal member of the orchestra. Examples in the Berkshire Festivals included an oboe concerto by Johann Griesbach, a cello concerto by Robert Lindley and a violin concerto by Johann Peter Salomon. The vocal soloists also contributed hugely to these concerts with glees and songs with titles such as 'Hail Happy Warbler' and 'The Soldier's Dream', as well as items by established composers including Attwood, Bishop, Meyerbeer and Weber. Occasionally political events intruded, as when 'Rule Britannia' was performed in 1816 with an additional verse by 'a lady of Reading in honour of Lord Exmouth's victory'. This referred to the bombardment of Algiers by the Royal Navy, in order to free Christian slaves on 27 August 1816. Such tributes to national heroes were immensely popular at the time.[15]

There is no doubt that the programming of such miscellaneous concerts, geared as they were to celebrity soloists, provided little sense of unity.

The Performers

Conductors were amongst the most prestigious of performers at the provincial festivals. It appears that on occasion Richard Binfield combined conducting with his overall directing responsibility, but for the most part a separate conductor was appointed. The most eminent of these was Sir George Smart (1776-1867), principal conductor of London's Philharmonic Society.[16] He conducted the Berkshire Festivals in 1819, 1822, 1825 and 1831. Other less well-known conductors included George Frederick Harris, William Hawes and Charles Lucas.

At Richard Binfield's first festival on 2 October 1806 the principal vocal soloists in *Messiah* included some well-known singers, including Mrs [Marie Theresa] Bland, described as 'a magnificent ballad vocalist',[17] Mr [Thomas] Vaughan 'a chaste tenor singer' and a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal,[18] and Mr [James] Elliott, a bass vocalist, 'singer of reputation' and one of the principals at the Birmingham Festival of 1802.[19] At the 1819 festival, amongst the soloists, was Kitty Stephens, Countess of Essex (1791-1882), 'one of the finest sopranos of her day'.[20] In a diary entry, a former Mayor of Reading, W. S. Darter, commented: 'never shall I forget the wonderful effect produced in the sacred edifice by the singing of Miss Stephens (Countess of Essex) of Let the Bright Seraphim accompanied by Mr Harper on the trumpet'.[21] The vocal soloists in this festival must have caused some tensions, hinted at in the *Musical World* report which criticised the Irish composer and singer Michael Balfe (1808-1870), for an 'inexcusable want of punctuality thereby delaying his arrival'. It continued more positively in the case of the popular soprano soloist Miss [Margaret] Stockhausen, who apparently had 'recovered from the hoarseness which disabled her at the Grand Festival at Norwich last week'.[22]

The main choral parts in the first festival were supplied by members of the Chapel Royal, Windsor, in addition to five singers from Oxford and 'five others'. From 1810 the main choir was listed as 'Gentlemen from St George's Chapel, Windsor', whilst in 1819 it was joined by the Chapel Royal. We shall see that Binfield relied particularly on these two choirs up to the festival in 1836. Drummond observes that early nineteenth-century festivals, as in Berkshire, relied upon cathedrals and parish churches to provide the nucleus of the choral forces, which consequently tended to consist almost exclusively of male singers.[23] However, at the three-day festival in 1819, alongside the gentlemen from St George's, the Chapel Royal, and St Paul's Cathedral, appeared the celebrated female chorus from Lancashire called affectionately 'the Lancashire Witches'. This ensemble of five or six female chorus leaders was a regular feature of provincial musical festivals throughout the country, and provided a reinforcement of the highest choral lines.[24] The group subsequently sang at several of the Berkshire festivals.

In 1839 there was a significant shift, with the choral forces from London, Windsor and Oxford being assisted by 'Gentlemen of the Reading Amateur [Music] Society'.[25] On this occasion, the *Berkshire Chronicle* noted the large numbers of choral singers 'among whom were a strong corps of female choristers substituted for the children of the chapels royal and cathedrals'.[26] Perhaps this signalled an important change from a 'cathedral/parish church' festival to a 'civic' festival. It was consolidated in the last two festivals when the London Professional Choral Society supported the rest of the singers, conducted by George Frederick Harris, organist of St Lawrence Jewry Church in the City of London.

With regard to instrumentalists, the leader of 'the band' in the first three festivals was none other than [Johann Peter] Salomon (1745-1815), who had brought Joseph Haydn over to London. Also playing in the orchestra in 1806 were five members of the extended Binfield family, perhaps most notably the cellist Thomas Binfield (1781-1840) who was based in London as a professional player. He played at Sadler's Wells and appeared as a soloist in Philharmonic Concerts. Straeton grouped him amongst 'the most eminent players [cellists] of every country'.[27] The organ accompaniment at the first festival in 1806 was played by twelve-year old Mary Binfield (Richard's eldest daughter), 'with a skill which elicited the admiration of the conductor, Mr Salomon'.[28] Mary would be followed forty years later at the last of the Berkshire Musical Festivals by one of Richard's grandsons, 'Master [Bilson] Binfield, a youth of only fourteen years', who presided at the organ 'with correctness and precision'.[29]

By 1819 there were nine members of the extended Binfield family playing alongside some highly prized instrumentalists. The leader of the orchestra was Franz Cramer (1772-1848), who also held the same position with the well-known Ancient Concerts in London.[30] The leading cellist was Robert Lindley (1776-1855), principal cellist of the opera[31] and closely associated with another longstanding member of the festival orchestra, Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846), the world renowned double-bassist. Together with bassoonist John Mackintosh (1767-1840), and trumpeter Thomas Harper (1786-1853), these regular members of the Berkshire Festival orchestra represented the cream of London's freelance players.[32]

An enlightening observation from the three-day festival of 1819 about the place of local amateur players was made by W. S. Darter, which indicates that there was significant participation by them in the orchestra, alongside professionals: 'All the amateurs gave their gratuitous service and attended several rehearsals in the large room of Mr Binfield's house. At those I played the flute part, but at the festival I was put in the shade by the celebrated flautist Mr Ireland, with Mr Kates as second and I was content to play an oboe part'.[33]

For the evening concert in 1839, Richard Binfield had managed to book one of the star celebrities of the period, 'the first pianist of the age' Sigismund Thalberg (1812-1871). There was great anticipation. The audience started to arrive around 6 pm, and by the concert's start, two hours later, the hall was full and 'could have included a hundred more'. Thalberg impressed the audience with his virtuosity in his celebrated fantasia on the airs in Don Giovanni. He was given great applause, which, the *Musical World* commented, 'M. Thalberg acknowledged with a modesty rather unusual in foreign artistes'.[34] Earlier in the day Hannah Binfield played 'an organ concerto on a theme of Handel' in which she exhibited 'lightness, grace and grandeur'.[35]

It is difficult to find independent views of the standard attained at these festivals. However J. W. Davison did comment on such things on his 1842 visit. He was impressed with the performance of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*: 'I have nothing to offer but unqualified praise: band, chorus and soloists ever each perfect'. As far as the chorus was concerned in extracts from *Messiah*, he thought they were admirable for 'accuracy and power'. In Mendelssohn's *Psalm 42* he found 'a few slips of the band … a slight mystification among the soloists in the quintet; and some few and far wrong notes from the chorus'. The performance of selections from Binfield's manuscript oratorio, *The Martyr of Antioch,* 'was scarcely done justice to' although 'it seems to have a good vein of melody'.

His overall comment on the evening concert was that 'like most miscellaneous selections it contained much that was good, [and] a considerable quantity of indifferent material'. He praised the charming performance of Hannah Binfield's song 'Genius singing to love', and was much impressed by the playing of her niece, Susan Havell, in Hummel's Piano Quintet: 'a very young but evidently a very talented pianist'. He thought the overture to Mozart's Die *Zauberflöte* was played at too slow a tempo, but the performance had great precision. The second part opened with the overture to *Prometheus* by Beethoven. Although played with infinite spirit it nevertheless 'was not always with the accuracy (especially on the part of the winds) which so well-known an overture ought to endure'. However he seemed well satisfied with the concert, calling it 'one of the most successful ever recollected'.[36]

Audiences

In his *A Handbook of Musical Biography*, David Baptie emphasised that Richard Binfield 'was in the habit of getting up "Triennial Festivals" of music *at his own risk*'.[37] As Drummond observes, he was unusual in being prepared to promote events more or less single-handedly, rather than through a committee.[38] But the financial burden was considerable.

Ticket prices for the morning concert of the second festival in 1810 were 10s 6d in the gallery of the church, and 7s for a seat in the body of the church. The evening concert and ball cost 10s 6d.[39] Such prices ensured that the festival only attracted the well-to-do, and whereas morning concerts were easily accessible to the leisured class, many artisans and shop keepers would have to make complicated arrangements to attend.[40] The ticket prices remained mostly at this level for the remaining festivals. Binfield introduced terms of subscription in 1825, so that a subscription of 5 guineas would provide 11 tickets, and one of 20 guineas would result in 48 tickets.

As Simon Gunn points out, audiences for such festivals were identified as 'the leading families of the district'.[41] Binfield expressly aimed his publicity at 'the Nobility, Gentry and His Friends'.[42] His impressive list of patrons from this social group numbered 170 by the 1819 festival in addition to 30 gentlemen stewards.[43] Darter observed that 'the patronage Mr Binfield received surpassed anything of the kind known to us'.[44] Binfield was grateful: 'it is only with the kind and liberal co-operation of those who honour me with their patronage that I can venture to engage in an undertaking of such magnitude'.[45]

As far as numbers attending the festival are concerned the estimates are clearly impressionistic. Ditchfield reckoned that in his visit in 1813 between five and six hundred people attended the morning concert, with only 321 present in the evening.[46] This pattern was reversed in 1819 when the *Reading Mercury* recorded 300 in the morning and 800 in the evening.[47] Probably the most reliable estimate is provided by Davison who attended many such events throughout the country.[48] He estimated that at the 1842 festival, there was an attendance of 750 in the morning and upwards of 600 persons in the evening. At the last festival in 1846, there were reported to have been 651 persons in the morning, but only 476 in the evening.[49]

Finally some mention should be made about the festivals as social occasions for those in attendance. As Gunn observes, the dress of the assembled audience at the festivals symbolised their place in the social scale of society, their wealth, and their taste.[50] Press reports glow in their descriptions of the Berkshire audience. One example must suffice:

> Thursday was one of those bright and beautiful autumnal days … it enabled the fairer sex and the sensitive on the score of health to attend … At twelve o'clock there was not a single seat in our spacious Town Hall unoccupied. More than 700 persons of the superior classes, four-fifths composed of elegantly dressed ladies, at one extremity of the room, the orchestra with its crowded pyramidical elevation, and at the other a gallery densely filled with spectators, formed a *coup d'oeil* calculated to give a foreigner a high opinion of the wealth of even a provincial district in England.[51]

As for the balls, the music was provided by amongst others James Paine (1778-1855), orchestral leader of Almack's Assembly Rooms, a socially exclusive and fashionable London club. He was one of the most successful band leaders of the 1820s, and was celebrated for his arrangements of quadrilles for dancing.[52]

A report from the 1825 festival succinctly describes the procedure for the ball:

> As soon as the Hall could be cleared, quadrilles commenced; and at one o'clock an excellent and abundant supper was served up on the lower floor … after which dancing was kept up until an early hour of the morning.[53]

Conclusion

Why did this series of thirteen festivals come to an end? Two contributory factors were hinted at by the local newspaper: the growth of popular musical entertainment, and the advent of railway travel between Reading and London.

The *Berkshire Chronicle* noted that the selection of music of a high and classical character was consciously made by the festival organisers, 'disdaining the more ephemeral works', even if this meant financial sacrifice. More specifically blackface minstrelsy was singled out: 'there will be no pandering to the vitiated taste of mere wonder-seekers … no black-visaged nondescripts palmed upon us by dint of impudence and burnt cork as 'Mesopotamian Minstrels'.[54]

Furthermore, with the rail link from London to Reading having been opened in 1840, there were problems in attracting audiences to Reading-based cultural events. 'In the present altered state of society, with such an incessant flux of every kind of musical novelty to the metropolis, and the facilities of travel which render a journey to London the amusement of an hour instead of the business of the day, it is extremely difficult to compete in the provinces, with the attractions of our modern Babylon'.[55]

Fundamentally however, financial backing was a constant headache, resulting in a preponderance of one-day festivals. It culminated in the disappointing number attending the 1846 event, prompting the rather despairing comment: 'it is quite inadequate to meet the serious expenses attending this great undertaking'.[56]

What were the achievements of the Berkshire Musical Festivals? First, they became a Berkshire institution. In a newspaper comment on 8 October 1842 it was pointed out that 'The Musical Festival is the only public amusement fairly supported by the county as what we may term a Berkshire institution'.[57] In spite of 'an obvious want of that provincial feeling which we find in other counties', it had been demonstrated by the organisers that 'it *is* possible to unite the gentry in behalf of the Berkshire Musical Festival'.

Second, the festival from the start offered a platform for local performers, particularly those with a Binfield family connection, including the versatile Hannah Binfield as organist, harpist, and composer, and Susan Havell as pianist. Third, it made the transition from a cathedral/parish church event to more of a civic occasion, and this resulted in the greater participation of local amateur musicians, and most notably a strong corps of female choristers which replaced the previous all-male forces. Fourth, undoubtedly the three-day festivals of 1819 and 1822 represented a high-water mark, which could match the practice of the great provincial festivals. It was a demonstration of what might be possible. Finally, the singular achievement of Richard and John Bilson Binfield over a forty-year period was to bring into the county such a prestigious series of concerts, ensuring that a rich collection of sacred and secular music was performed by some of the best musicians in the country. It had been a truly Herculean task.

Notes and references

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52 See N. Temperley, 'Ballroom and Drawing-Room Music', in *The Athlone History of Music* vol.5.:*The Romantic Age 1800-1914* (1981) p.109.
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Berkshire Record Society

Peter Durrant

In 2018 Berkshire Record Society celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary. It is, of course, a relative newcomer on the historical scene in Berkshire, compared with the Berkshire Archaeological Society (founded in 1871) and the Berkshire Local History Association and the Berkshire Family History Society (both 1976). It is also a late arrival compared with other county record societies: the Staffordshire society was founded in 1879 and others soon followed. Of our neighbouring counties, Surrey began in 1913, Oxfordshire in 1919, and Buckinghamshire and Wiltshire in 1937. However, in its twenty-five years it has made a significant contribution to historical study in Berkshire, and it has ambitious plans for the future.

The origins of the Society can be traced to an initiative from Professor Donald Matthew, then Head of the History Department at the University of Reading. In May 1991 he wrote to Margaret Smith, County Local Studies Librarian:

> Over the last few months I have been discussing with various colleagues the possibility of starting a Berkshire Record Society devoted to the publication of important texts of the historic county. There is now a sufficiently clear impression in my mind that this idea has possibilities, and I would like to gather together a group of people to consider how the project could be launched publicly, subscribers enrolled and publishers found.

This was not the first time that a Record Society had been proposed, but no previous move had progressed beyond the stage of preliminary discussions. On this occasion the proposal led to action. Margaret forwarded the letter to me, I arranged to meet Donald, and together we agreed that a meeting of interested people should be called at Reading University. This took place the following month.

All those present at the meeting (five representatives from the Department of History, one from the School of Continuing Education, one former lecturer from Bulmershe College, two former (mature) students, and one archivist) agreed that, however inauspicious the time, the attempt should be made to set up a Record Society. And in some ways the time was very inauspicious. Establishing a publishing organization was in some respects like setting up a small business, and in recent years small businesses had been failing with uncomfortable frequency. Moreover cuts in public funding, particularly to academic institutions, meant that subscriptions were being scrutinised very carefully, and in some cases

reduced drastically. We had to create a product, and then sell it. Although we knew in general terms what our product was, we had nothing concrete in place, and we certainly had no market: that too had to be created. However, we determined to persevere. The meeting established a working group, comprising representatives of the University and the Record Office, the working group went away to make plans, and, as time was to tell, we eventually succeeded.

Knowing what our product was to be – published volumes of edited texts – was the easy bit. But actually producing them for publication was a different matter. We had plenty of ideas for texts, which we hoped would be attractive to potential subscribers, but none had been prepared, nor, yet, did we have anyone to prepare them. Fortunately, however, we knew that Gill Clark had been working on the correspondence of the Foundling Hospital Inspectors in Berkshire. This was ideal: a fascinating story, told through the original correspondence of the men and women intimately involved in the business of putting orphan children out to nurse between 1758 and 1768. Gill agreed to prepare a text for publication, and we were delighted. This was to be Volume One. However, one volume was hardly enough: we needed more, and we needed them quickly. The immediate need was met when Donald Matthew secured the award of a research grant from the University which enabled the Department of History to fund a post of Research Assistant during the academic year 1993-94. We appointed Ian Mortimer, with a brief to prepare editions of the glebe terriers compiled as a result of Archbishop Laud's visitation of Berkshire in 1634, and a selection of probate accounts compiled in the Archdeaconry of Berkshire between 1583 and 1712. These appeared as Volumes Two and Four. In between, as Volume Three, we published an edition of overseers' case papers from thirteen south Berkshire parishes, prepared by me, but based on a volunteer project run by the Berkshire Record Office and the Berkshire Family History Society. These not only provided a sound foundation, but also gave us time to commission further volumes whose preparation needed more time.

However, at the same time as securing volumes for sale we needed to secure a reliable source of income to pay for them. In the short term we were helped enormously by some generous grants from charitable foundations. But in the longer term we had to build and sustain a solid base of regular subscribers. This involved compiling lists of names and writing a great number of letters. It also involved organising publicity in as many periodicals and magazines as we could think of, and of arranging events. In May 1992 we held an open meeting at the University to which representatives of local history societies were invited, and as a result of which an enlarged steering group was established. The following year we agreed with the School of Continuing Education to run a day school on sources for local history in the University Library, during which we held a

discussion on the proposals for the Record Society. After some eighteen months of planning and preparation we felt confident enough to arrange a formal launch. The then Chairman of Berkshire County Council, Jim Day, kindly allowed us to hold it in the Windsor Room at Shire Hall, and agreed to chair it. Donald Matthew spoke eloquently about the need for a record society and the Record Office contributed an exhibition. The main speaker was Mary Clapinson, Keeper of Western Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, who, in providing a survey of the history of record publishing in England, reminded us both of the value of record publishing, and the hazards that record publishers face. Record Societies, she said:

> have made an abundance of original material available in published form, introduced generations of local people to the joys of pursuing the history of their own area and pointed up for professional historians the usefulness of whole new classes of records. The introductions to the best local publications have made a major contribution to historical studies of society as a whole (not just local society) and have often led the way for national studies. Thanks to record societies, no-one nowadays feels the need to justify the publication of local records.

But, she warned us, publication was not without its trials and tribulations:

> Copy for the record society volumes does not leap unaided on to the desk of the general editor. Most are the result of years of effort … The minutes of [the Oxfordshire Record Society's] Council Meeting of 1930 record the decision to publish editions of the papers of Henry Stevens (wagon master to the army of Charles I) and documents of Henley Borough. Stevens was eventually published in 1961 and Henley in 1960. The latter volume, in the three decades of its preparation, went through the hands of several editors, on the way provoking the resignation from the society of no less a person than Professor Powicke on the grounds of 'certain things' done by Mr Hautenville-Cope as General Editor. (Just for the record, I should add that Mr *and* Mrs Hautenville-Cope then resigned on the grounds of 'certain criticisms' contained in the Professor's letter of resignation.)

That meeting was an important step on the road to establishing the Society, but its future was not yet secure, and a major task over the coming months was to recruit enough subscribers to make the organization viable. We had already agreed to aim for publication in the autumn of 1994, and thus recruitment was urgent. All those who had expressed an interest were written to and promises called in. Many who had not expressed interest were also written to. As much leverage as possible was applied. And success came, though at times a little slowly. The steering group had set a target of 200 to 250 subscribers. By January 1994 only 86 subscriptions had been achieved. This had risen to 147 by April. By November we had secured 170 – short of our target, but sufficient to proceed, and Volume One was published, more or less as planned, in December 1994.

Starting is all very well, however. The next challenge is to keep going. We gave much thought to the texts we were to publish, as on these would depend the society's future. We looked for a number of things. We wanted a good range of subjects and a good range of periods; we wanted volumes that would cover the whole of the county as well as ones that would focus on particular areas; and we wanted subjects that would add to existing areas of strength in record publishing and subjects that would break new ground; we would try to strike a balance between the perceived needs of a national academic audience and those of a more local and general audience; and we hoped to attract as editors both those professionally involved in history and able amateurs. Happily we think we have succeeded on all fronts. In date our volumes range from the early fourteenth century to the mid-nineteenth. Several volumes cover the whole county (glebe terriers, probate accounts, meeting-house registrations, the religious census, Archdeacon Randall's notebook, feet of fines) while others are quite place-specific (Reading gild accounts, Newbury Kendrick workhouse). Some, such as the diocese books of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and the minutes of the Thames Navigation Commission, are of regional significance. Churchwardens' accounts and feet of fines have been published by many societies: our volumes provide new riches in established areas. Glebe terriers and probate accounts, on the other hand, were at the time emerging areas of study, while turnpike records have scarcely been published at all, in spite of the economic importance of the turnpike network in the eighteenth century.

But from early on we decided that we would not be limited to texts. An important step in this direction was Ross Wordie's survey of enclosure in Berkshire, 1485-1885, published as Volume Five. Even more important was the index to Berkshire archdeaconry probate records. This was a major undertaking. The existing index, prepared in the late nineteenth century by W. P. W. Phillimore was no longer adequate and had a number of errors. We decided we should prepare a new one from scratch. With generous funding from the Marc Fitch Fund, Berkshire Family History Society, Oxfordshire Family History Society, Berkshire Local History Association and Berkshire Record Office, plus an input from ourselves we were able to advertise for the full-time post of indexer, and after a rigorous selection process appointed Pat Naylor. The result of her work was published in three volumes in 2011.

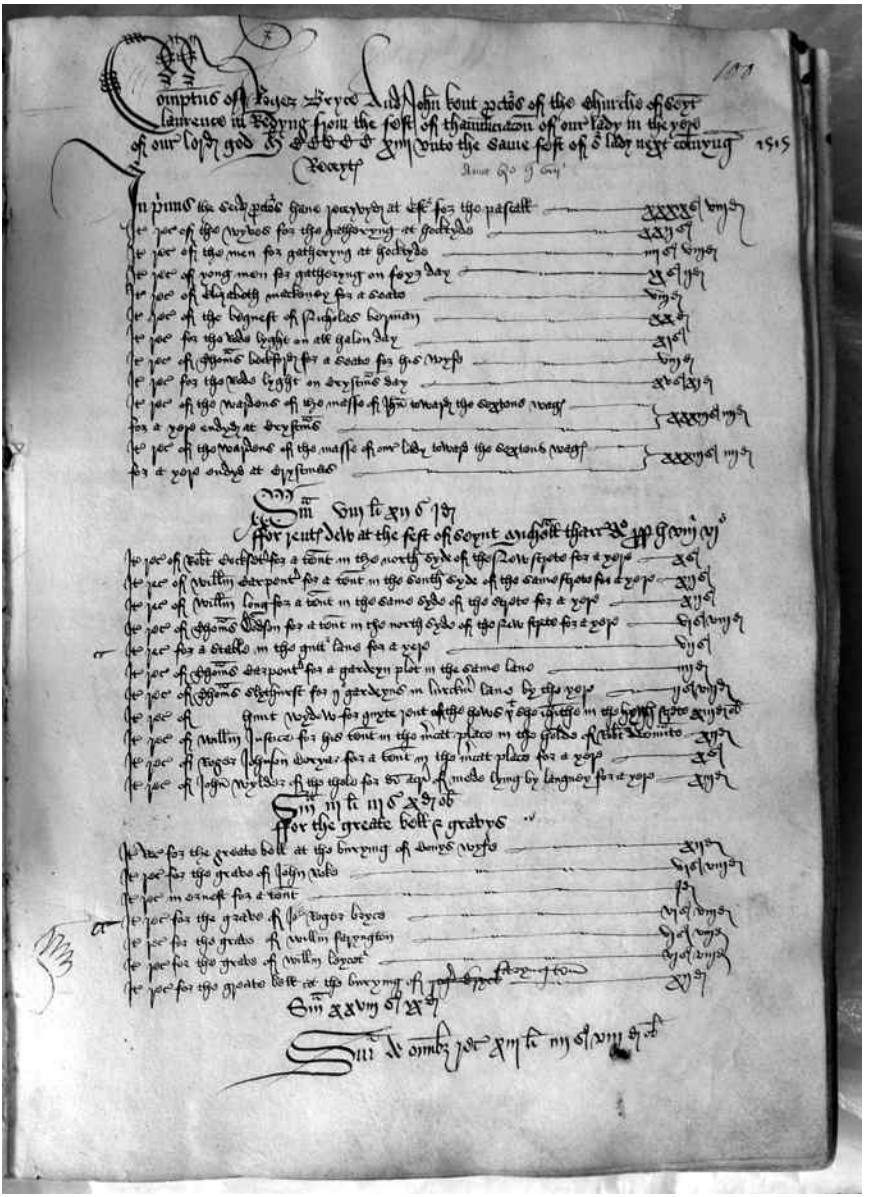
In addition to the general series the Society has published two editions of an historical atlas of Berkshire. The first, which appeared shortly after the abolition of Berkshire County Council in 1998, was partly inspired by a wish to remind people that, although its administrative council had gone, the county of Berkshire lived on. It was, as the Lord Lieutenant wrote in his foreword, 'a sign of its continuing vitality and relevance', adding that 'Berkshire Record Society [is] one of the many societies for which the county is a natural focus'. The volume, edited by Joan Dils, and amongst the first

county atlases to appear, was an unqualified success, so much so that a second, enlarged, edition was called for. This, edited jointly by Joan Dils and Margaret Yates, had over one-third more essays, and, taking advantage of advances in printing technology, was produced in full colour. This too has won critical acclaim.

Record publications offer ready and unrivalled insights into an extraordinary wealth of historical evidence, as a few examples from our own series will demonstrate. The accounts of the churchwardens of St Laurence, Reading, for example, edited by Joan Dils, which the Record Society published in 2013, take us straight into the world of the English Reformation, and reveal the immense impact it had on a local community. Between 1547 and 1553, in response to the instructions of Edward VI's ministers, these churchwardens made massive changes both to the appearance of their church and to the form of services that were offered there. They sold their communion vessels (Nicholas Bull, a London goldsmith, paid them the substantial sum of £36 8s 8d for two censers, a cross, a basin and an incense boat, and a further £11 9s 4d for a monstrance and a chalice); they took down altars and destroyed images (in 1547 they paid 12d to two carpenters for taking down images, 12d to Geoffrey Penne for mending the walls where the images had stood, and 17s 3d to Alexander Lake and his man for covering the walls (and any wall-paintings) with whitewash – which incidentally took 23 days); they removed the church's stained glass, and they paid £15 10s 5d for 777 feet of plain glass to replace it; and they disposed of their liturgical books. Much of this had to be reversed during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558), and then reversed again after the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558.

Similar detail and colour can be found in many of the Society's other volumes. In 1357/8, for example, the total expenses of Reading's merchant gild amounted to £10 19s 6d. A good deal of this was spent on food and drink ('for roebuck meat and mutton, 15d'; 'for congers, 6d') and for wine for the abbot ('item, sent to the abbot 3 gallons of wine … price 2s'), but substantial sums were spent on repairs for the guildhall, including taking down a gable and replacing it with a lantern, for which 23 men were paid in kind with 14d worth of bread, 26d worth of meat, one pennyworth of garlic and a hefty 3s 0½d of ale. We know this because it is recorded in the first surviving gild account roll, edited by the late Cecil Slade. Dr Slade's two volumes, published in 2002, actually include all surviving account rolls from 1357/8 to 1515/16, and from them we gain a vivid picture of life in medieval Reading–the market stalls, the street cleaning, the maintenance of public buildings, the borough courts, the street entertainments, the relations with the abbot–evocatively brought to life in his extended introduction.

Other examples abound. Ian Mortimer's edition of the glebe terriers, mentioned above, contains not only a comprehensive account of church



A page from the churchwardens' accounts of St Laurence, Reading. These were published in Reading St Laurence Churchwardens' Accounts, 1498-1570, *edited by Joan Dils (2 vols, 2013). Reproduced by permission of Berkshire Record Office*

Dr Cecil Slade of Reading University working on Reading's medieval gild account rolls in the old Berkshire Record Office searchroom, c.1997. These were published as Reading Gild Accounts, 1357-1516 *(2 vols, 2002)*

glebe and tithes, but also numerous field names (Bushie Roses and Holly Roses, Coales Piddle, Gooers Hedge, Maple Hays, Sparrow Acre, Stuckwell Foot, Swilly Acre and Thorny Down are just a few) and incidentally tells us of the existence of a poor house in Finchampstead. Lisa Spurrier's edition of Berkshire non-conformist meeting-house registrations allows us to explore the spread of non-conformity in the county between 1689 and 1852, and reveals that while most congregations, not surprisingly, registered a building, one registered a field (where presumably they intended to erect a tent). And Harry Leonard's edition of the diaries of Robert Lee of Binfield takes us into the world of an eighteenth-century country gentleman and magistrate, a cultivated, conscientious and humane man who took his role as a gentleman and magistrate seriously but not solemnly, who on the whole enjoyed his life, liked the company of his friends–and admired a pretty girl. The diaries open a window onto Lee's life and the life of a rural community in the 1730s and 1740s. We see him in London, where he went to the theatre (and we know some of the plays he saw), visited Vauxhall Gardens and Sadlers Wells, frequented coffee houses, dined with friends, and played billiards with the painter Hogarth; and we can see him at home in east Berkshire. Here he dined with his friends, and had them dine with him (and occasionally drank too much); he visited the Trumbulls at Easthampstead Park, attended the Assembly at Bracknell (in August 1736 he was one of a large company of 24), and drank the waters at Sunninghill Wells; he went shooting (though not always very successfully: in September 1737 he records that he 'W[en]t shooting with the Young Farmer and Danll Louch. Young Farmer shooting at a hare hit Mr Heads man in the back ... The Young Farmer shooting at another hare shot Farmer Matthews of Bottomstead servant boy in the hand and put severall shots in the Horses Hair. We all shot nothing'); and he performed his duties as a magistrate at Quarter

Sessions and Assizes, dealing with poor relief, bastardy, licensed premises, minor assaults and breaches of the peace.

More recently we have published Sabina Sutherland's edition of Archdeacon Randall's church inspection notebook, 1855-1873, Jeremy Sims's edition of the minutes and accounts of the Newbury and Chilton Pond turnpike trust, 1766-1791, and Margaret Yates's edition of Berkshire feet of fines, 1307-1509.

Randall's notebook, with its often vivid descriptions of the churches he visited, gives us a fascinating insight into the state of the Anglican church in mid-nineteenth-century Berkshire. West Woodhay was 'a miserable modern church [it had been built in 1716], though built at great expense. Ill-cared for and looking desolate.' The rain came in through the tower roof. At Compton the chancel had been left when the church was restored in 1849-50, and was in 'dreadful disrepair'; but this was due to a dispute between the two lay impropriators, one of whom obstinately refused to bear his share of the cost. Hagbourne was 'a noble church but all to pieces. Roofs, floors, doors, seats, windows all want thorough repair and restoration, especially the roofs, the boarding of which is almost perished and requires immediate attention'. Hanney was in a rather alarming condition: the piers were mutilated; 'it seems', noted Randall, 'that there had been an intention of carving them down from Norman to a later style and that the operation had been found too dangerous to be completed. Some of the piers are supported by wooden props and the arches by iron braces'. The whole of Letcombe Regis was in poor condition, 'especially the chancel which is absolutely miserable, damp and green for want of repair and the walls red washed'; at Aston Upthorpe 'the chancel is falling down. It has been propped with large brick buttresses but is still giving way'; Leckhampstead was 'utterly dilapidated'; while Besselsleigh was described as 'a poor little neglected ruinous church. Neither Patron nor Rector seem to care for it'. He also had critical comments to make on galleries, private pews, screens and fonts. However, to set against this he noted numerous instances of careful and thorough repair and restoration, and was able to say in the charge at his 1858 visitation: 'So much has been done, and is doing, throughout the archdeaconry for the improvement of churches, both in point of comeliness and convenience that I think the force of such good examples must tell upon the parishes whose churches have been hitherto uncared for ...'.

The surviving records of the Newbury and Chilton Pond turnpike trust make this the best documented of all Berkshire's eighteenth-century turnpikes. Through them we learn how the road was planned and how the funds were secured to get the turnpike trust established. They show the practical difficulties of raising and spending money and of negotiating with interested parties, and show also how the road was maintained and improved and how attempts were made to control its use, documenting such

matters as the acquisition of land, the erection of gates and gatekeeper's houses, the installation of milestones (and the pursuit of those who defaced them: in 1784 one guinea reward was offered for information leading to the conviction of the person who defaced the stone at East Ilsley), the purchase of materials, as well as illustrating how the trustees dealt with encroachments (and ensured that neighbouring landowners kept their trees and hedges from obstructing the road), and checked the weights of wagons (in 1775 a set of weights and scales was purchased for the keeper of the Donnington gate) and the width of their wheels. Along the way we meet a great many of the people who, in one way or another, were connected with the turnpike trust: the promoters of the project and the turnpike trustees, the people who subscribed money, the officers of the trust–the clerks, the surveyors, the gatekeepers and other servants of the trust–as well as many of the local users. The volume is a rich source, not just for the history of this trust but also for the wider story of turnpikes in Berkshire and beyond.

The two volumes of Feet of Fines contain summaries of over 1500 fines, and provide an amazingly rich source for the study of landholding (and land holders) in late medieval Berkshire. They show the gradual move away from arable farming to pasture over the period, and the appearance of large flocks of sheep in holdings on the Lambourn Downs, reflecting the importance of the Berkshire wool trade in this period. They also provide an invaluable source of evidence for the activities of Berkshire families as landowners, both those who were successful in surviving the vicissitudes of war and disease, and those who died out for lack of heirs. John Norris (d. 1466) of Bray is just one example of a man from a relatively humble background who purchased extensive landholdings using the profits gained from years of service to Henry VI both at court (particularly as Master of the Wardrobe) and in the localities, serving as Sheriff, JP and also MP for Berkshire on six occasions. In addition to those lands granted him by the king, he secured his title to the manor of Yattendon through fines and in 1488 obtained a charter to crenelate the manor house and to make a park there, and he also rebuilt the parish church. He extended his possessions at Bray and c1450 built Ockwells, 'the most refined and sophisticated late medieval timber-framed house in England'. Much of this activity is revealed in the records in this volume.

Three more volumes are close to completion as I write, and indeed the first will have appeared by the time this article appears in print. This is Brian Kemp's edition of selected Reading Abbey documents, including an account (with some wonderful detail) of the miracles attributed to the hand of St James, and which has been timed to coincide with the reopening of the ruins after the completion of conservation work. This will be followed by a survey of Berkshire schools, 1666-1833, containing much new evidence of schools and schoolmasters and mistresses in that that period, and an edition of

selected records relating to the 'Swing' riots in Berkshire, 1831-1832, which includes eye-witness accounts of some of the rioting and destruction of farm machinery which took place in west Berkshire during these turbulent months. More are in the pipeline.

Add to all this the distilled experience and knowledge of editors expressed in introductions and footnotes, and there is enormous value to be found in these pages. However, as we, the founders, knew 27 years ago, while the Society depends upon its editors for high quality volumes, it also depends on its loyal subscribers to ensure its future. Like every voluntary society, Berkshire Record Society needs to keep renewing its membership. If you feel that our work is worthwhile, why not join us. You might well discover new opportunities for research, or new insights. Even if they are not in your field, you will find that many introductions are stimulating essays in their own right. You will know that you are supporting publications that have an enduring value and will outlast many monographs – and you will be building up an impressive library at a remarkably modest cost!

For full details look at our website, www.berkshirerecordsociety.org.uk or email me at peter.durrant@reading.gov.uk.

Some of the volunteers on the Berkshire Schools in the Eighteenth Century project outside Tom Brown's School Museum in Uffington, 2017. The results of this project, edited by Dr Sue Clifford, will be published by the Record Society, late 2018.

Note: this account is drawn from the archives of the Berkshire Record Society and its published volumes. A full list of titles is available on the website. I am grateful to Professor Ralph Houlbrooke and Dr Margaret Simons for commenting on my early draft.

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