

Wokingham Society Open Meeting

Thursday June 18th 2015

Berkshire Record Office: Exploring the County's Archives

A Presentation by Dr Peter Durrant in Wokingham Town Hall

Dr Peter Durrant, the recently retired Berkshire County Archivist, fully engaged the attention and interest of members of the Wokingham Society and guests with an informative and fascinating exploration of the history and activities of the Berkshire Record Office.

Founded in 1948, the Record Office has records dating back over 800 years and Dr Durrant gave his audience an insight into the variety and extent of the archive by referring to specific records ranging from 16th century wills to the impact on individuals of the Poor Laws in the 19th century. He surprised the audience by referring to a record relating to India and the Black Hole of Calcutta, explaining that anything relating to the experiences of Berkshire people could find its way into the Archive. One of the most important items in the Archive is in fact a huge map of India brought back to Berkshires by a local family.

Amongst the many items in the collections are records from all the parishes, schools, courts, former workhouses and charities in Berkshire, and after 100 years the records of the Church of England find their way into the Archive. The personal records of businesses and individuals are also housed in the ever-growing collection in the grounds of Yeomanry House, its third home close to the original site in Forbury. At present some 800,000 records are looked after by a staff of 15-20 people with help from local volunteers.

Dr Durrant wittily recounted the activities of a Dr Tuck, who in the nineteenth century visited houses on large estates and returned with records of significant interest. He also referred to the discovery of an important 14th century record which had been kept in a shoe box in an attic and he noted that a man had returned from Paris with postage stamps which filled gaps in a collection already in the Archive. The Office had rescued items from rubbish tips, skips after fires and damp cellars. Church records which had been badly burnt had also been rescued from total destruction.



Essentially, he said, the mission of the Record Office is restoration and cataloguing and he referred to ways in which the public can access the records. Exhibitions and Open Days are held, publications in the form of books, guides and magazine articles are promoted and contributions have been made to television programmes. He added that a request had even been received from Japan to use a poster advertising the disappearance of Agatha Christie!

Historical research is available to huge numbers of people covering inter alia the history of the Thames, including the building of Goring lock with inferior materials which necessitated its rebuilding. The cost of rebuilding the lock with oak, elm and fir was, according to a certain Mr. Treacher £1153 14 shillings and a halfpenny. Reports from the *Times of India* and Russian newspapers are available as well as detailed records of Broadmoor Hospital. There are, he said, fantastic records of Reading and Wallingford from the 14th century.

Amongst the anecdotes told by Dr Durrant, one which particularly captured the imagination of the audience was the tale of a man who dictated his will from his bedroom window to a scribe standing below. The contents of wills in fact provide a fascinating insight into the lifestyle of the testator and he referred to a will drawn up in c1588 which provided a snapshot in time of how a man could be defined through his possessions. Similarly a man who went to America gave a detailed account of his experiences in his will. Yet another entertaining anecdote related to the treatment in 1771 of the gatekeeper at Loddon Bridge Turnpike Gate by a bully who refused to pay his toll. The gatekeeper stood his ground and eventually reported the bully who was roundly punished.

However, perhaps the most memorable stories related to the Poor Law and the treatment of offenders guilty of minor offences, who were hounded out of each parish they visited, usually ending up in the parish from which they originated. Women such as Grace Grace on the 6th April 1779 ended up back in Berkshire after years of weary travelling as Sarah Warne, a rogue and vagabond, did in 1817, having travelled in stages from the north Midlands and ending up in Chieveley, much to the annoyance of the local parish officers.

Having recounted so wittily the ways in which the Archive records the activities and experiences of individuals and institutions, Dr Durrant proceeded to provide information about records of Wokingham specifically. Amongst the records held are the original Wokingham Charter of 1621, the abolition of the Wokingham Fair and drawings of Public Works. There are copies of rare books from the early 20th century, records of All Saints church from 1764 and vestry records of St Paul's church. Important maps of the town reside in the archive as well as the records of the old workhouse.

Dr Durrant concluded by saying that the Archive is the essence of heritage, recalling events and actions shaping the present, but a crucial element in the modern keeping of records is the urgent need to grapple with the problem of electronic records which are not good for permanent storage. He believes that a print version is preferable despite problems occasionally caused by changes in paleography. Humorously he referred to himself as the *Berkshire Shredder*, a role he quite enjoyed on occasions!

Dr Durrant packed an enormous amount of information into 50 minutes and the audience responded enthusiastically to his presentation, and the many questions which followed

indicated how he had captured the interest of his audience. In thanking him Society Chairman Peter Must referred to his very positive personal experiences when conducting research at the Record Office, and he complimented Dr Durrant for providing such a stimulating, witty and informative exploration of the County's Archives.