Berkshire Family Historian

BERKSHIRE FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

The quarterly journal of the Berkshire Family History Society

September 2026
Volume 50



Inside this issue:

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The Besley Family in Australia
Society News

Submissions to the editorial panel

All submissions to the editorial panel will be considered to be offered for publication in the magazine and on the society's website, unless accompanied by a clear statement to the contrary. If the written piece asks for a response from readers, permission to publish contact details will be assumed. All articles submitted are done so with the understanding that they may be edited to fit the editorail style and space available.

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Front cover image

St Bartholomew's Church, Lower Basildon by Philip Halling, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

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Editor's Notes



Welcome to your Sept 2026 Berkshire Family Historian. Currently, I am still here as your magazine editor, but I have hopes of finding someone to take over. Feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss the role, as I do need to step down to concentrate on my other roles within the Society.

As usual we have a range of personal articles as well as Society updates. You'll notice that 'Around the Branches' has been renamed in accordance with the change announced at the Annual General Meeting in June. This, from a member perspective, is purely a name change, there is no change to the delivery of meetings.

We always welcome your articles, so, if you have anything you think may be of interest to others, please do get in touch.

Vicki Chesterman
editor@berksfhs.org.uk

Chairman's Corner



This is my first update as your chairman and I want to thank Catherine for all she has done developing the vision for the Society and particularly getting us into our new home.

If you haven't yet managed to visit, it is well worth coming along. It is easy to find, being next door to the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) and part of Reading University's London Road Campus. If driving, we have a limited number of parking permits at a reasonable price so please call ahead to book one if visiting Monday or Tuesday.

You may notice changes at local events as branches are renamed as teams simplifying our administration and hopefully broadening our offering. We hope to raise our profile by attending small local events to promote the Society and members are very welcome to get involved. If you have ideas about how we can better support members locally, as well as online, please get in touch.

My hope is that by this time next year we will have the Centre open five days out of seven, with occasional special events.

Nick Prince

chairman@berksfhs.org.uk

51st Annual General Meeting Report

The 51st Annual General Meeting was held on Monday 22nd June 2026 on Zoom and 72 members attended. This meeting, as in previous years, we welcomed audience participation with various members voicing their thoughts and ideas for the society. We thank you for your comments.

The accounts were approved by a majority vote and the appointment of an independent examiner of accounts was also endorsed.

At the meeting all the Officers, the President and Vice-Presidents and Trustees shown on the Agenda were voted in.

Gillian Stevens and Catherine Sampson stood down as Trustees and both were thanked for their years of service to the Executive Committee.

Mark Stevens and Irene Littleby returned as our Vice-Presidents. The Trustees are actively seeking a successor to the role of President, which is currently vacant.

Nick Prince was elected as Chairman, Vicki Chesterman as Vice-Chairman, Alison Pedley as our returning Secretary and Andrew Rice continues as Treasurer - a role he kindly stepped in to cover midway through the year.

Two new Trustees were elected to the Executive Committee - Paul Barrett and Vanessa Chappell - who are both past Trustees. The Trustees who stood for re-election were Dave Purling, Sandra Barkwith, Leigh Dworkin, and John Dunne and were duly re-elected for a further term.

This meeting was recorded and is available on the society's website.



Researching at the Society's Centre

http://berksfhs.org **0118 950 9553** *researchcentre@berksfhs.org.uk*

Family Research Centre, Ground Floor, L14 London Road Campus, London Road, Reading RG1 5AQ

What3words: melt.tinsel.love

You hopefully will already know that we have opened our new Family Research Centre and have been welcoming members and visitors on tours since mid-June. We are located on the University of Reading's London Road Campus, at the junction of Redlands Road and Acacia Road, and adjacent to the Museum of English Rural Life.

Opening hours	
Day	**Open between**
Monday	**11:00 - 16:00**
Tuesday	**11:00 - 16:00**
First and second Saturdays	**11:00 - 15:30**

Getting Here
We are approximately 15 minutes walking distance from the town centre, and about 20 minutes from the railway station. The Centre is well served by buses, with stops on London Road, Kendrick Road, Redlands Road and outside the main entrance of the Royal Berkshire Hospital – all within easy walking distance.

There is parking on the University Campus near the Centre which is enforced Monday to Friday 08:00 -17:00. It is free on Saturdays. To park on the campus, you will need a visitor parking permit and these can be obtained from the Society for a small charge - see our website for more details. Otherwise, there is some off-street meter parking or a public car park, approximately ten minutes walk away at Queen's Road.

Facilities in the Family Research Centre

- The best facilities for family history research in the Royal County.
- Access to millions of family history records, plus expert advice to interpret

them and build your family tree.
- A lively and illuminating programme of in-person and online events, designed to inform and entertain.

Our spacious research room has multiple public PCs with free access to:

- Ancestry worldwide
- Findmypast worldwide
- The Genealogist
- British Newspaper Archive
- The 1939 Register



The Family Research Centre

In addition, we are a Family Search Affiliated Library giving you access to hundreds of millions of images of original records relating to Berkshire and beyond, not available at home. We also have an extensive reference library including an excellent collection of local trade directories. Plus, our impressive bookshop is on hand to browse, with well over 1,000 products to choose from.

Getting help with your research

Our friendly and knowledgeable Research Assistants are always on hand to help, if you need it. We also have free research guides on a variety of topics. Pre-bookable one-to-one help sessions are available each month - you can find these in the events listing, along with free Centre Tours which are in the calendar already for the rest of this year.

If you can't make it into the Centre, and need help or just inspiration to overcome that brick wall, online help sessions using Zoom are also available on a monthly basis.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Family Research Centre very soon.



Our first visitor signs in

Events organised by The Centre

September - December 2026

Our events programme includes face-to-face and online events, the latter using Zoom.

All events are advertised on the Society's website; please do check it regularly as occasionally changes occur, and new events are regularly added. You will find more face-to-face events taking place in our new centre this quarter. As a reminder, the address is: Family Research Centre, L14 London Road Campus, London Road, Reading RG1 5AQ. For more information see: *berksfhs.org*

Family Research Centre Tours – FREE - Join us for a tour of Berkshire Family History Society's new Family Research Centre. Pre-booking required. See website for details of public transport and parking.	
Oct Mon 19th 11.30am - 12.30 pm **Nov** Mon 2nd & Dec Mon 7th 1 - 2pm Family Research Centre	The centre offers the best collection of resources in Berkshire for family history research, wherever in the world your research takes you. The tour will introduce you to the facilities and the new venue. And you can stay afterwards to do some research, if you would like to. So come prepared! You can purchase lunch, if you haven't brought a sandwich with you, at The Dairy Cafe next door. The tour includes tea/coffee and biscuits.

House Histories Open Day - See website for full details, no need to book - just drop in. Refreshments will also be available for a small charge.	
Sep Sat 5th 11am - 4pm FREE Family Research Centre	Are you interested in tracing the history of your house and its occupants? Come and sit down with one of our expert advisors who will offer practical guidance and show you how to get started and progress your research. The Centre's computers will give you access to Ancestry Worldwide, Findmypast Worldwide, the British Newspaper Archive and The Genealogist. Plus we are a Family Search Affiliate Library with access to millions more original records online. Our reference library contains an extensive collection of

Transport & Industry Talks Series with tea and biscuits

Held at the Abbey Baptist Church, Abbey Square, Reading RG1 3BE at 2.30pm. This quarter, it comprises just two social history talks as our venue is not available in December. As a result, tickets can only be purchased on an individual basis, rather than also having the option of an all series ticket. Pre-booking is recommended, but you can pay at the door, subject to availability.

Sep Thu 17th 2.30 - 3.45pm Houses & Estates Talks Series	**Opulence and Neglect: the changing fortunes of the Vachells of Coley House, 1638-1705:** with Dr Margaret Ounsley Using two inventories of goods in Coley House taken in 1630 and 1710, Dr Margaret Ounsley reveals what they tell us about everyday life in one of Reading's 'great houses' at these times, but also the massive social and economic changes going on in the 17C and the changing fortunes of the Vachell family.
Oct Thu 15th 2.30 - 3.45pm Transport & Industry Talks Series	**British Rail in Berkshire in the 1970s:** with Dr Richard Marks The 1970s was a decade of extremes, eccentricities, and enduring legacies - the highs, lows, and legendary catering of a remarkable era in Britain's railway history. The High Speed Train blazed through a network still dotted with tired 1950s stock. Whilst some stations looked half-abandoned, some commuter lines thrived with modernisation marching on, sometimes sensitively, sometimes not.
Nov Thu 19th 2.30 - 3.45pm Transport & Industry Talks Series	**The Silk Industry in Reading:** with David Cliffe The silk industry existed in Reading for over 200 years, and employed over 500 people in the early 19th century. Yet nowadays, few have heard of it. David will describe the different processes involved in silk production, how the industry in Reading was run, some of the firms involved, and whereabouts they operated.

DNA & Family History – Online - Places are limited, pre-booking is required.

Oct Sat 3rd 2.30 - 4.30pm ONLINE £5 (members £4)	**DNA Special Interest Group** Facilitator: Debbie Kennett Aimed at those wanting to get the most out of their DNA results. All levels of expertise with interpreting DNA results are welcomed but you should have some experience of working with your DNA matches to get the most out of the group.

Workshops - See website for full details. Places are limited, pre-booking is required.	
Sep Sat 26th 11am - 1pm Family Research Centre £10 (members £9)	**Tracing Your WW2 Army Ancestors** Workshop Tutor: Dr Richard Marks This workshop guides you through the process of tracing soldiers who served in the British Army during the Second World War, showing you where to look, what survives, and how to interpret what you find.
Oct Thu 15th 7 - 9.30pm ONLINE Members only FREE	**Creating an enduring family tree in YourTrees** Tutor: Paul Barrett Wish your grandparents had recorded a family history? Make sure your grandchildren don't miss out. Create a lasting family tree in YourTrees - durable, clear and built to endure.
Oct Wed 28th 7 - 9pm ONLINE £10 (members £9)	**Tracing Your WW2 Royal Navy Ancestors** Tutor: Dr Richard Marks This workshop guides you through the key sources for researching Royal Navy personnel during WW2, explaining what records exist, where they are held, and how to interpret them. Whether you just know that "he served on a destroyer", or have a bundle of documents you're unsure how to read, this session offers clear pathways, practical research strategies, and the confidence to bring a story to life.
Nov Thu 5th 7 - 9pm ONLINE Members only FREE	**Getting the Most out of Your Membership** Tutors: Vanessa Chappell & Catherine Sampson Discover the range of membership benefits, including accessing the Society's transcriptions, ways to collaborate with others, and discounts and savings. Questions welcomed.
Nov Sat 14th 11am - 1pm Family Research Centre £10 (members £9)	**Writing Up Your Family History** Tutor: Dr Barry Jerome Have you been researching your family tree and would like to write it up as a story but don't know how to start? In the popular workshop, Barry will help you get started and show you how you can structure it, so that you can write up your family history while still continuing your research.

Dec Sat 5th 11am - 1pm Family Research Centre £10 (members £9)	**Tracing Your WW2 RAF Ancestors** Tutor: Dr Richard Marks This workshop introduces the essential sources for researching RAF personnel during WW2, explaining what survives, where it is held, and how to interpret it. Whether you're starting with a logbook, a service number, or simply a family story, this session offers clear guidance, practical research strategies, and the confidence to reconstruct an RAF career with accuracy and meaning.

Guided Walks and Tours - See website for full details, pre-booking is required.	
Sep Tue 1st 2 - 4pm £20 (members £18)	**Tour of Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Great Park** This is a rare opportunity to tour a Royal property in the Windsor Great Park. Built in 1650, for much of its existence Cumberland Lodge was the official residence of the Ranger of the Great Park. Past residents include Royalty and Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough. Our private tour ends with tea/ coffee.
Sep Thu 10th 2 - 3.30pm £5 (members £4)	**Eldon Road area, Reading - a historical tour** with David Cliffe David Cliffe will guide us around the historic conservation area bounded by Eldon Road and Watlington Street, which is famed for its stunning architecture. We will learn the history of the area, people and buildings. The tour will end at the Wesley Church on Queens Road, where Dr Jonathan Brown will tell us its history.
Oct Fri 2nd 1 - 3pm £5 (members £4)	**Medieval Reading - a walkabout** with Terry Dixon & Jennifer Berdollt This tour of Medieval Reading will take you back in time over a 1,000-year period, from 476AD to 1450s. Reading would have looked and felt so different. Highlights will include the Greatest Knight, the Viking invasion, Reading Abbey, Reading's 3C's, food & so much more.
Nov Sat 28th 10.30am - 12 noon £5 (members £4)	**Tour of All Saints Church, Maidenhead** with Ken Smith Learn about the history of this grade I neo-gothic church built in 1857 by G E Street as a Tractarian church. The church is of a collegiate style on one side of a grass quadrangle with the old vicarage, parish centre and church houses on the other three sides. Light refreshments will be available.

Potpourri Social History Series

The Autumn Potpourri Talks series comprises three online social history talks. All series tickets can be purchased for the discounted price of £12.50 (members £10) or individual talks for £5 (members £4). Pre-booking is required.

Sep Thu 24th 2 - 3.15pm Summer Potpourri Series	**A walk along the Thames Path: Marlow to Runnymede:** with Bill King Bill King returns with another section of his walk. In this talk, we continue downstream through the leafy and most historic parts of the middle Thames valley via Cookham, Maidenhead & Windsor to Runnymede, site of the signing of the Magna Carta.
Oct Thu 22nd 2 - 3.15pm Autumn Potpourri Series	**Sign of the Times: Reading's Memorials:** with Malcolm Summers This talk will describe aspects of the town's history by considering some of its, often not well known, plaques, statues, and monuments. Even the better- known memorials have secrets to yield in the tales of their origins.
Nov Thu 26th 2 - 3.15pm Autumn Potpourri Series	**A Timeline of Thames Valley History:** with Jim Donahue Berkshire has played a surprisingly important role in the development of the British Isles as a whole. Jim's stories range from evidence of some of England's earliest prehistoric ancestors right up to the present day, featuring the rock stars, film studios and high-tech industry that now make their home in the region.
Dec Thu 10th 2 - 3.15pm Autumn Potpourri Series	**Victorians at Christmas:** with Dr Richard Marks Step back into the world of carols, crackers, and candlelight as we explore how the Victorians shaped the Christmas we know today. From Dickens's A Christmas Carol to decorated trees, this talk uncovers the traditions, innovations, and social changes that transformed a modest winter holiday into the season of celebration.

Natter Group – Online - Free

Sep 1st, **Oct** 6th, **Nov** 3rd & **Dec** 1st 6.45 for 7pm End time varies	Informal discussion group facilitated by Gillian Stevens & Chad Hanna. Topics are chosen by the group on a monthly basis. Members only. Please check the website for topics to be discussed. Pre-booking is required.

Family History Advice Sessions – FREE

Our popular online family history advice sessions continue. These sessions are 1-1, free of cost and are available to members and non-members alike. Pre-booking required.

Sep 21st, **Oct** 19th & **Nov** 16th 2 - 4pm ONLINE	**Online 1-1 Family History Advice Session:** with our Research Assistants Need some guidance on how to proceed or stuck at a particular "brick wall"? We will provide help and suggestions and book a follow-on session with you, if needed. Four 25 minute 1-1 slots are available in each session.
Sep 7th, **Oct** 12th, **Nov** 2nd & **Dec** 7th 11am - 12noon Family Research Centre	**F2F Family History Advice Clinic:** with Vanessa Chappell In these pre-booked one-to-one sessions, each lasting an hour, one of our seasoned advisors will try to help you make some progress.

Ravenscroft Family of South Africa – The Progenitors

Diane Sharp *discovers the roots of this branch in her tree*

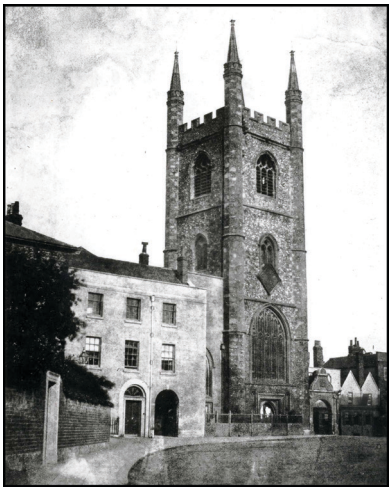
Family legend has always had it that the progenitors of the Ravenscroft family in South Africa, George Ravenscroft and Marian (Anne) Weller, found themselves on the Atlantic Ocean island of St Helena when George was stationed there as an officer in the regiment that guarded Napoleon Bonaparte. George's military records, however, show this to be little more than a myth.

George Ravenscroft was born in Reading, Berkshire, England, around 1802/3 [1] to George Ravenscroft (1765–1829) and Mary Smithers (1772–1860), his father's third wife. George was one of nine children: five were full siblings and four were half-siblings. He was 19 when he married Marian (Anne) Weller on 17th November 1823 at St Laurence's Church in Reading. The witnesses to their marriage were James Mills and Marian's sister Hannah Weller.

Marian's parents were Thomas Weller (1780–1865) and Mary (née unknown). She was the eldest of four children, her siblings being Hannah, Harriet and Thomas.

George and Marian welcomed their first child Mary Ann before January 1825. Their second-born was Harriet who was born in June 1825. And then, on 5th October 1825, at the age of 21, George enlisted in the British East India Company (EIC) army. So it was that three months later, on 19th January 1826, George, Anne and Harriet departed from England, aboard the Lord Lowther bound for St Helena, finally disembarking on the island on 19th March 1826 after two months at sea.[2] Mary Ann did not accompany them, but remained in England with her grandparents and was raised by them and her aunt Emma Ravenscroft (1807–1893).

Their arrival on St Helena marked five years since Napoleon Bonaparte had died there on the 5th May 1821 at the age of 51, having been exiled to St Helena on 15th October 1815 with those followers who voluntarily accompanied him after his defeat at Waterloo.[3]
We know from the Descriptive Roll of First Company St Helena Artillery that George was a gunner, his former occupation listed as a cordwain. Cordwainers were – and still are – shoemakers, highly skilled craftsmen who used the finest goatskin leather from



St Laurence's Church c1845 by William Henry Fox Talbot (1880–1877)15

Cordoba in Spain.[4] George would have learnt his trade from his father who, according to his 1802 marriage record, was a shoemaker.

George served in the EIC army on St Helena from 1826 to 1836. During this time, according to William Ravenscroft 5, George guarded the burial place of Napoleon on the island to protect the body from the possibility of 'clandestine removal'. It is most likely that this was the source from which the family myth evolved.

Sadly, George and Anne lost their daughter Harriet, who died on 17th May 1827. The tragedy, however, was followed by happier events, the births of their sons George (23rd March 1828), Thomas (8th December 1829), William (14th November 1832) and John (11th July 1835).

George's service in the EIC finally came to an end when a provision of the India Act of 1833 transferred control of St Helena from the East India Company to the Crown, with effect from 22nd April 1834. The last Company governor, Charles Dallas, stayed on in his post after the India Act came into force, not leaving until the first Crown governor George Middlemore arrived on 24 February 1836.[5]

George could have opted to return to England with his family or stay on with the EIC and be posted to Bombay; he, however, chose to join the 72nd Foot in the Cape Colony as a private. He and his family thus departed from St Helena and arrived in the Cape Colony sometime before 5th April 1836.[6] At the time, the 72nd Foot was heavily engaged in the Sixth Cape Frontier War, which raged from 1834 until May 1836, and the records show that George was on guard duty during this time (Regiment #882), being paid between 1d and 6d per diem. In June 1836, the Regiment's headquarters were established in King William's Town but were moved to Graham's Town in October of that year.[7]



The ship Lord Lowther, commanded by Charles Stewart Esq., leaving the harbour of Prince of Wales Island, engraved by Edward Duncan (1803–1882).16

From January to March 1837, George found himself on detachment at Botha's Point and at Double Drift.[8], [9], [10] From April to June that year, his primary service was guard duty at the base and between July and December 1837, when not on active guard duty, George spent a total of 26 days in the Regimental Hospital (10 and 16 days respectively). Unfortunately, regimental records do not record the reason/s for this. From January to September 1838, George continued as a private in the Regiment, with a detachment to the Frontier between July and September that necessitated a five-day sea journey.[11] But just a month later, in October, the Regiment was relieved of its frontier duties and returned to Cape Town.[12]

From October 1838 to June 1839 George continued with his guard duties, spending 73 days on active duty and 19 days in the Regimental Hospital (once again, no reason is recorded) between July and September 1839. George remained in the 72nd Foot until 29th February 1840 when he was finally discharged, with a payment of £5.
After 12 years of service in the Cape Colony, the service companies of the Regiment were relieved in April 1840 and returned to England in May 1840, disembarking at Portsmouth on 8th June 1840. (The depot companies had already returned to Scotland in May 1838.)[13]

While with the Regiment and based in Graham's Town, George and Anne's son John died at the age of 17 months. Three months before his death, in September 1836, Maria was born, but she sadly died on 26th December 1837. James was born in Graham's Town in 1838, followed by their last child Charles who was born in Wynberg, Cape Town, in June 1841.

It is not known when or where George and Anne died or where they are buried. According to family lore, George died some years after 1841 in the Cape and Anne, who had trained as a nursing sister in England, was very much welcomed by doctors in Cape Town. Unfortunately, she felt that she was handicapped by her sons, so she decided to put them in the care of foster parents where they could learn a trade.[14]

The Ravenscroft family of South Africa can trace their ancestry from four of George and Marian (Anne)'s surviving sons: Thomas (1829–1907) (my great-great-grandfather), William (1832–1910), James (1838–1894) and Charles (1841–1912).

Notes/References

1 Descriptive Roll of First Company St Helena Artillery, The British Library, London, England. In October 1832, George Ravenscroft's age is shown as 29 and in January 1833 it is shown as 30, so we can assume that he was born between November 1802 and January 1803. The January 1834 Roll still shows him as 30, with April 1834 indicating his age as 31, which moves his range of birth from between November 1802 and April 1803.

2 Descriptive Roll of First Company St Helena Artillery and the ship's records for the Lord Lowther, The British Library, London, England.

3 https://www.britannica.com/biography/Napoleon-I/Exile-on-St-Helena

4 https://cordwainers.org/

5 Ravenscroft, William (1848–), Some Ravenscrofts, Telford E Stone.

6 http://sainthelenaisland.info/eastindia.htm

7 72nd Foot Quarterly Pay-List, 1st April 1836 to 30th June 1836, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, England.

8 Cannon, Richard (1848). Historical record of the Seventy-Second Regiment, or the Duke of Albany's Own Highlanders: Containing an account of the formation of the regiment in 1778, and of its subsequent services to 1848 (PDF). Parker, Furnivall & Parker. OCLC 1083492049.

9 https://www.artefacts.co.za/main/Buildings/bldgframes_mob.

php?bldgid=8505
10 https://www.123rf.com/photo_26492282_fort-double-drift-in-great-fish-river-reserve-eastern-cape-south-africa.html
11 72nd Foot Quarterly Pay-List, 1st January 1837 to 31st March 1837, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, England.
12 72nd Foot Quarterly Pay-List, 1st July 1838 to 30th September 1838, The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, England.
13 Cannon, Richard (1848).
14 Cannon, Richard (1848).
15 Allmeyer, Rudi (2025). The Ravenscroft Family of Montagu. Montagu Museum. https://montagumuseum.co.za/montagu-stories/125-the-ravenscroft-family-of-montagu/
16 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:St._Laurence%27s_Church,_Reading,_c._1845.jpg
17 National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-156531

Is Your Inbox Full? Don't Miss Out!

It's a common problem, and it can mean you're missing out on society news and other essential communications. Your email inbox can only hold so much. Once it's full, no new emails can get through - they bounce back to the sender.
When this happens, you could miss our newsletters, event booking confirmations, and important updates about your membership.

It's Not Just Us You're Missing!

A full inbox doesn't just block our messages. It could also stop you from receiving critical information from others, such as **bank statements** and **utility bills; receipts** and **delivery details** for online orders; **Zoom meeting links** from us and other groups; and, even more importantly - **messages from friends and family.**

How to Keep Your Inbox Happy
A quick tidy-up can make all the difference! Here's how to ensure you get all your important messages:
Delete old, unneeded emails. Go through your inbox and delete anything you don't need anymore.
Empty your 'Bin' or 'Trash' folder. When you delete an email, it often moves here first. You need to empty this folder to free up space completely.

A simple tidy-up every week or two can prevent your inbox from getting too full.

Getting into a regular habit of deleting old emails will ensure you never miss an important message from us - or anyone else - again.

51st Annual General Meeting of Berkshire Family History Society

Chairman's Report to Society Members - *you can read the full version on our website under the 'What's On' tab*

Overview
This year we have completed our move out of Reading Central Library and into our new premises on the University of Reading's London Road campus. Despite the significant investment of volunteer time and energy in the move, we have not only continued the everyday operation of the Society throughout but also expanded the Society's services, events and activities. That double achievement is testament to the efforts of our amazing volunteers to whom we are enormously grateful.

New Premises
After eight and a half years on the second floor of Reading Central Library, we closed the doors for the final time at the end of April. We have enjoyed a close working relationship with the library team and are confident that we will continue to work closely with them after the dust has settled following both of our moves. Our thanks go to them for their support during our time in the library building.

Since moving in we have been made to feel very welcome by the University of Reading, our new landlords. The new premises is accessible by bus and car and is approximately 10-15 minutes walk from the town centre, about 20/25 minutes from the train station. It is well served by local cafes and next door to the Museum of English Rural Life with its superb archive.

With the new premises, we have taken the opportunity to rename our base and this new one will be known as the Family Research Centre. As I write this, we are hoping to reopen in June; all going well, shortly before this AGM. Whilst this represents a good step forward towards normality, there is still more to do and inevitably we will make some tweaks and changes until everything is how we want it to be. We look forward to receiving your feedback when you are able to visit.

The new centre will offer new and enhanced facilities to our visitors. For the first time, for some considerable number of years, the Society's valuable reference library will be available to consult within the Research Room. In addition, we have extended the coverage of the British Newspaper Archive to all terminals. The new Centre retains the six PCs plus reception PC which we had in the library, but each terminal will now also have enhanced access to Family Search's rich image archive, up to 300 million more document images than one can view from home, as we have formally become an affiliate library to them. We hope this will be of great benefit to our members and visitors and enable greater access to view original documents.

The opening hours of the Family Research Centre have increased slightly [see the 'Researching at the Society's Centre' page of this journal for more info].

My thanks go to all of our Research Assistants and support volunteers who do an amazing job.

The Genealogist remains available online via the website to all members, on days when the Centre is closed.

Membership
Welcome to the new members who have joined the Society during the past year. Our membership numbers remain healthy, although slightly down on last year.

In early 2025 we introduced membership auto-renewal facilities, with members able to choose between Direct Debit (UK only) or card which will be auto-debited at renewal.

Members have continued to receive discounts on Society products, and also continue to be able to attend many events for free, or for a discounted ticket price. Other popular membership benefits include member-only events, exclusive Berkshire data, Findmypast membership discount, YourTrees, the Forum, InTouch and the Historian, access to other Societies' journals, and video catch-up.

Thank you to everyone for renewing your membership, to the UK taxpayers who renew their Gift Aid declarations, and all who are able to make a donation.

Branch Meetings and Outreach Activities
Over the course of the year, one branch operated exclusively online, whilst the other five met both face-to-face and online. An ongoing review of our branch structure has resulted in the removal of much of the bureaucracy, streamlining the talk booking process, and dispensing with the need for formally elected branch committees Branches will now be led by an informal team.

The number of Combined Branches Meetings increased from three to four during the year, the new one filling a gap in the meeting calendar in July.

Topics have ranged from the always popular member evenings to talks on accessing and interpreting sources, AI, research stories and local history topics. For anyone unable to attend the meeting, often a video recording is also available.

Branch-run advice sessions, an important part of our charitable activities, have taken place in Bracknell and Wokingham libraries. These sessions are advertised on the website and at the libraries.

Thank you to our branch chairpersons and all of their branch committees for the sterling work they have done.

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Communicating with our Members
In Touch continues to land in the inboxes of our members every other Sunday, with an events update in the alternative weeks.

We also have branch newsletters going to those who follow all of our six branches.

During the last membership year, the Historian editorial panel continued to produce a rich and varied content in each issue, reflecting the breadth of research interests of the society's membership. The Historian can be received either in physical form or electronically. Thank you to everyone who has provided articles and contributions.

Website, and Social Media continue to maintain, develop and continually refresh the Society's website so that it performs well and remains user-friendly, dynamic and relevant.

During the last year, we have adopted AI-assisted development to modernise our technical infrastructure. These tools have dramatically reduced some of the manual workload of our volunteers.

The Society's online mechanisms by which members and non-members can contact the Society remain in regular usage.

Social media remains an important outlet to the wider world. Our existing platforms are X (formerly Twitter) and Berkshire Genealogy Facebook group. We have recently opened a Berkshire Family History Society Facebook page to allow us to feed postings to Berkshire Genealogy, and have extended our postings to other outlets such as Bluesky, Blogger and Pinterest. The Society has also been invited on to local radio (BBC Radio Berkshire) several times during the year.

We keep in touch with other Family History Societies through the journal exchange.

Projects and Publications
Good progress has been made on the Fifth Edition of Berkshire Baptisms and this should be published during the year ahead. We have published a further 60 data download products and there has also been a further tranche of material published on Findmypast .

Thank you to all of our volunteers who have made this possible, your efforts are much appreciated. Thank you also to Mark Stevens and his team at the Royal Berkshire Archives for their support during the year.

Events, Education and Promotion
Over 1,450 individuals attended events between May 2025 and April 2026 - some face-to-face, some online, some free and some with a modest fee.

This last year's programme included social history talks, family history workshops, walks, tours and courses, open days, advice sessions, informal natter evenings, a DNA special interest group and our Golden Jubilee Conference. Events take place at different times of the day and on different days of the week to improve accessibility.

These events are led by a committee who are supported by a wider team of volunteers. Thank you to all of our knowledgeable speakers, tutors and walk leaders who have supported the programme over the last year.

We also attended Marcham Society's Open Day in October 2025, Oxfordshire Family History Society's Open Day the same month, East Surrey Family History Society's virtual Fair in January 2026, Berkshire Local History Association's AGM in March, and Abingdon Town Council's Clubs and Societies Day in April. We have plans to support more local events during 2026.

Bookshop
The Bookshop stocks over 1,000 items, many of which are Berkshire specific and some difficult to obtain elsewhere. The Society's own publication "A Secretary Hand ABC Book" continues to be very popular, as are the county-wide CDs. However, the mix of our data sales are steadily swinging to more PDF downloads rather than CD products, as we had expected and anticipated.

Services for Members and the Public
Your Trees continues to steadily grow and now contains 461 trees. These trees feature over 399,000 individuals, 131,000 families and 518000 places. This free service allows members to upload a copy of their family tree(s) to the Society's website, and collaborate with others with similar surname interests. Quarterly workshops have continued to be offered through the year for new users.

Delivering Public Benefit
The Charities Act, 2011, requires that all registered charities report their main activities and achievements in relation to the objects of the charity.

The Society's charitable objects include:
- to advance education of the public in research into family history and genealogy, primarily but not exclusively within the boundaries of the pre-1974 Royal County of Berkshire;
- to work to promote the preservation, transcription, indexing and ready public accessibility of related records and information.
-

Benefits are:
- readily available and accessible to members and the public;
- taken actively into local communities in a wide range of regular meetings, outreach events, and other activities; and
- available free of charge at the point of delivery, in many cases.

Many of the benefits that the Society offers have been laid out in this report.

Society Governance
The Society is managed by an Executive Committee (the Trustees), elected annually by members. They met seven times this year. Consideration and implementation of the Society's activities is managed in detail by nine sub-committees and working groups, and the six local branches.

If you are interested in helping with an aspect of the Society's activities or becoming a Trustee, please contact the Society's Secretary.

What of the Future?
We will continue to improve and extend the Society's programme of activities, events and services and to improve access to them, regardless of physical location.

The Trustees' priorities ahead are as follows:
(1) Membership.
(2) Successfully launch the new Centre and establish it as a lively and well-used facility for researchers.
(3) Bed-in the revised branch structure to ensure it best meets the needs of our audiences and volunteers.
(4) Continue to reduce the amount of volunteer effort needed to carry out administrative functions.
(5) Co-host with the Berkshire Local History Association another Berkshire Heritage Fair.
(6) Continue to offer a varied and interesting range of events for the enjoyment and benefit of our members and non-members.

As a charity entirely run by volunteers, the future of the Society rests in the hands of our members and those who are willing to volunteer to help it. We are almost always looking for more people willing to share their skills, talents and time, and I would urge you to get involved, if you aren't already doing so.

Thank You to every Volunteer
Finally, a sincere thank you to the many volunteers who keep us thriving as a Society, ensured that our move went smoothly, and helped to expand and develop new services and new ways of doing things. Your efforts have made a difference to the world of genealogy and historical research in general and have enabled people across the world to better research and trace their family roots.

Thank you to my fellow Trustees for their dedicated work in managing the many facets of our activity in what has been a particularly busy year.

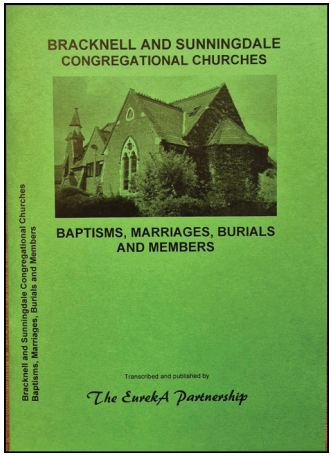
Catherine Sampson
Chairman, Berkshire Family History Society

Book Reviews

Bracknell and Sunningdale Non-Conformist booklets

The Society bookshop is now stocking two books published by the EurekA Partnership relating to churches in the Bracknell and Sunningdale areas that may be of interest to our members researching those parts of the county.

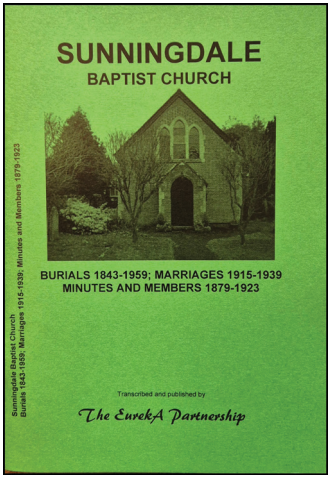
Bracknell and Sunningdale Congregational Churches - Baptisms, Marriages, Burials and Members



The records for Bracknell Congregational Church are the register of baptisms 1814-1923, the register of deaths 1822-1859, abstracts from the minutes books from 1813 to 1915, and lists of members for 1879, 1882, 1889, 1903, 1908, 1915 and 1928. The records pertaining to the Sunningdale church are a register of baptisms from 1905 to 1924, of marriages 1881 to 1944 and of burials from 1864 to 1979.

It should be said that registers for the Bracknell baptisms and deaths are limited (2 pages) and that most of the names in the index relate to the copious minutes and membership lists.The registers for Sunningdale are more extensive occupying 4 pages. Nethertheless this book is a name rich source for researchers.

EurekA, 56 pp, 2025 Shop £6.00; UK £7.55; Airmail £15.55



Sunningdale Baptist Church - Burials 1843-1959; Marriages 1915-1959; Minutes and Members 1879-1923

Again only the first few pages are transcripts of the registers, although these are more extensive than those from the Congregational church in Sunningdale. This book however is also very name rich, with the usual thorough name index that this publisher provides.

EurekA, 60 pp, 2025 Shop £5.50; UK £7.55; Airmail £15.05



News from the Royal Berkshire Archives

Lisa Spurrier, Archivist at the Royal Berkshire Archives

Building work update

The early stages of our building work have taken a bit longer than planned, but everything is now proceeding, with work starting properly in June. Visitors must now park ONLY in the staff car park, preferably along the west wall of the building. Don't forget to collect your permit each time! Next door, Yeomanry House, where the Berkshire Family History Society used to be based, has finally been sold and is also undergoing some building work. We hope it's not been too disruptive for our visitors so far!



Members of the 250th Reading Anti-Aircraft Battery R (TA) at rest, D-EX2934-1-025, reproduced with the kind permission of the Royal Berkshire Archives

New collections for family history

We have received the following registers: Reading St Agnes: marriages, 1997-2019; banns, 1992-2016 (D/P167).

Photographs of the 250th Reading Anti-Aircraft Battery R (TA) taken for Illustrated magazine in c.1940 show us a forgotten side of the Second Word War, with images of the men on and off duty: building defences,

firing the anti-aircraft guns, and even asleep in bunks (D/EX2934). Was your ancestor one of them?

We were fascinated by the memoir of Mary Macintyre, née Fairbairn, a London girl who trained as a mental health nurse at Berkshire Mental Institution in the 1930s (D/EX3077). She wrote about the training, and her own and fellow nurses' private lives, and adds anecdotal colour to what can sometimes seem dry records.

A small but interesting collection has been received for the Cook family of Reading, basket makers, 1818-20C (D/EX3091).

Our important collection of the records of the Royal Merchant Navy School (formerly The Merchant Seamen's Orphan Asylum and later Bearwood College) has been augmented by records from The Old Royals Association for former pupils, 1929-2018 (D/EX2689).



Cooks basket makers, D-EX3091-1-1-2, reproduced with the kind permission of the Royal Berkshire Archives

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Around the Teams

Please check the Society's website for up to date details of meetings

Abingdon Team

abingdon@berksfhs.org.uk

In April, the Abingdon Team held one of its discussion group sessions with a view to help members and potential members progress their genealogical studies. Recent 'brick walls' and advances were aired, as usual, and there was a short presentation on the use of AI for photo restoration and the transcription of old documents in family history research.

In May, local historian, Dick Richards, presented an excellent talk entitled The Road to Peace is Paved with Headstones which explored the stories behind some of the names on the Abingdon War Memorial. In his talk, Dick explored the impact of two world wars on local families and tight knit communities in the town, where fatalities and injuries changed some local streets forever.

Branch meetings are generally held, monthly, on the third Monday, at Long Furlong Community Centre, Boulter Drive, Abingdon. Doors open at 7.15pm for the meeting to start at 7.30pm.

Meetings ahead:

14th October (CBM, Zoom) **Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers** by Dave Annal

16th November (f2f) **Branches and Breakthroughs: Family History Discussion Group**

Please check the Society's website for details of other meetings.

Brian Denton



Abingdon's War Memorial - Motacilla, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Bracknell & Wokingham Team

bracknell@berksfhs.org.uk

In April, Dan Allen presented What Did You Do In The War, Granny?, examining women's contributions in wartime, particularly within the military. While it was known that women had long accompanied men into conflict - even before the

Middle Ages - it was striking how their roles became formalised only in the 19th and 20th centuries. Dan gave a detailed account of the establishment of female units beginning with the Army Nursing Service (ANS) in 1881, influenced by Florence Nightingale's work in the Crimea. In 1902, the service became Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service (QAIMNS), extending its reach further. As demands increased, numerous organisations formed and restructured. These included the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) created in 1909, providing not only nursing but also cooking, laundry, ambulance driving, and cleaning. Other units included the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), later the Princess Royal Volunteer Corps, the Women's Sick and Wounded Convoy Corps (WSWCC), the Women's Volunteer Reserve (WVR), the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC), the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF). Many women died in service in the First World War.

At our May meeting, Sue Ellis presented her talk After the Great War: History in the 1921 Census. This census is especially significant for family historians as it is the last available record before a 30-year gap and reflects Britain during the difficult post-war years of economic depression, social hardship and industrial unrest. Sue focused her research on families from the Bracknell and Wokingham area, comparing their circumstances in 1921 with those recorded in the 1911 census. Her findings highlighted the devastating effects of the First World War and the poverty experienced by many families. The heavy loss of men in the war left widows and children in desperate circumstances, worsened further by the impact of the Spanish flu epidemic on soldiers already weakened by wartime conditions. Overall, Sue's talk vividly illustrated the harsh realities of life in post-war Britain.

We are continuing to hold our drop-in advice sessions at Bracknell Library on the 2nd Thursday in the month and at Wokingham Library on the last Tuesday in the month.

Face-to-face meetings are held at the New Priestwood Community Centre in Bracknell, RG42 1TU, doors open at 2.15pm and the meeting starts at 2.45pm.

Meetings ahead:

18th September (f2f) **Beyond the Trenches: Britain and the Great War outside the Western Front** by Mike Cooper

14th October (CBM, Zoom) **Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers** by Dave Annal

20th November (f2f) **Wokingham's Markets and fairs from 800 years ago to the present day** by Peter Must

Sandra Barkwith & Michael Rea

Around the Teams

Please check the Society's website for up to date details of meetings

Newbury Team

newbury@berksfhs.org.uk

Between April and June, we had talks on the Heritage Record by Beth Asbury, Lady Hawk by Stephen Copperthwaite and Ghosts on the Farm by Nicola Chester. All were delivered face-to-face, fascinating subjects, and well received by those who attended.

By the time you read this we will have heard Tim Healey speaking about The Drovers, Roads in Oxfordshire and Beyond at the next combined teams meeting on July 15th.

Meetings ahead:

23rd September (f2f) **Team discussion - sharing our experiences of working with online records.** This is a new experience and will look at the 1939 Register and other sources

14th October (CBM, Zoom) **Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers** by Dave Annal

11th November (f2f) **Newbury Almshouses** by Sue Ellis

Keep in touch via the bi-weekly Society newsletters and the monthly Newbury Team newsletter. If anyone has ideas for West Berkshire focussed talks, family history specific subjects to explore or local events we might consider attending, please contact us via the website.

Nick Prince

Around the Teams

Please check the Society's website for up to date details of meetings

Reading Team

reading@berksfhs.org.uk

In April, the Reading team enjoyed a talk by Ian Wheeler on Five Generations at Fair Mile Hospital. Covering the reasons for, and the creation of, the Fair Mile Hospital in Cholsey in 1870, Ian went on to explain the principles of the institution. Originally built as the Moulsford Asylum, it has been known over the years variously as the County Lunatic Asylum, Berkshire County Asylum and Berkshire Mental Hospital. Ian's family have a link to the hospital going back to 1875 when his ancestor started work there as a gas stoker. More links followed through four more relatives across the generations working at the hospital in various roles.

In May, after a brief Branch Annual Meeting where the existing committee was disbanded upon the formation of local area teams, we heard from Katie Amos about Family History - the dark side. This presentation took us on a journey through Katie's ancestors and looked at the various ways that their lives can be traced. A new source for many of us was criminal petitions, which can provide a wealth of background family information. It pays to have ne'er-do-wells in the family!



Reading branch November speaker - Ian Waller

June's meeting was a hot affair due to the heatwave at the time. Mike Cooper came and gave a small but very interested audience a presentation on the History of Tilehurst. This very interesting talk went from 100,000BC to modern times, chronicling the changes, and asking the pertinent question - where was the centre of Tilehurst?

Meetings ahead:

24 September (f2f) **Parents at War** by David Bickerton

14 October (CBM, Zoom) **Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers** by Dave Annal

26 November (Zoom) **Fleshing Out the Bones** by Ian Waller

Vicki Chesterman

Around the Teams

Please check the Society's website for up to date details of meetings

Windsor, Slough & Maidenhead Team

windsor@berksfhs.org.uk

In April, Researching the Oldest Grave in Windsor by Mike Bailey was a valiant attempt to meet face-to-face again in Windsor coupled with many attending via Zoom in our first ever hybrid meeting.

Our May talk, Forget the Family Tree!; Tend your Family Ivy by Dai Davies reminded us that looking beyond your direct ancestors is the key to many brick walls and answered the question of how our ancestors' spouses can help us do just that.

Meetings ahead:

14 October (CBM, Zoom) **Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers** by Dave Annal

Please check out the Berkshire Family History Society website for the WSM branch future programme.

Leigh Dworkin

Dates For Your Diaries

Heritage Open Days *
Various dates between 11th – 20th September 2026
Multiple locations including Family Research Centre, L14 London Road Campus, London Road, Reading RG1 3AQ – see this Historian for more details

Oxfordshire Family History Society Fair *
Saturday 24th October 2026, 10am – 4pm
The Cherwell School, Marston Ferry Road, Oxford OX2 7EE

*Berkshire Family History Society will be attending

Heritage Open Days 2026

The annual Heritage Open Days are happening soon and Berkshire Family History Society is once again taking part. Events run throughout the country from Friday 11th to Sunday 20th September, and this year's theme has been announced as 'Everyday Lives'.

Come and visit the Family Research Centre in the old dairy building, now the home of Berkshire Family History Society and see an exhibition in the Events room of everyday lives in the Royal County of Berkshire .

The Society will be focusing on "Berkshire Heritage", and will have a team of experienced volunteers who can assist you with their knowledge and expertise to discover the past, whether it be your own heritage, or family, local, house or military history, wherever it may be in the UK or across the world. We have computers with free access to subscription websites such as Ancestry, Findmypast, British Newspaper Archive, and the Genealogist. A new addition is access to FamilySearch, as we are an affiliate library. We can show you links to a number of free websites that you can carry on using at home. We have a vast library of books and CDs.

The opening hours of the Family Research Centre will be (hours additional to our normal opening are marked *):

Saturday 12th	11am-3.30pm
Monday 14th	11am-4pm
Tuesday 15th	11am-4pm
Sunday 20th	*12-4pm

On Saturday 12th, Monday 14th and Tuesday 15th, during our normal opening hours, we will be offering free tours of the Family Research Centre and the facilities we offer.

Refreshments will be available for a modest donation.



Presented by Findmypast

Graveyard at St Bartholomew's Church, Lower Basildon

From the gravestones and memorial statues at St Bartholomew's are stories which are intertwined with the fortunes and histories of local families.

You will find memorials to Jethro Tull (1674-1741), an influential agriculturalist (not the band!) who was born, baptised and buried at St Bartholomew's, to wealthy local families such as the Sykes and the Morrisons. These families who separately owned Basildon Manor that later became National Trust Basildon Park, both helped to fund major restorations of the church in the 1800s.

This brings me to one of the most prominent memorial statues in the graveyard and to one of the most heartbreaking.

In 1885, Mr Edward Deverell, a farmer from Thatcham, moved his family to Church Farm in Lower Basildon just one year prior to the tragedy with their sons Harold, aged 16 and Ernest aged 15 who attended Newbury Grammar School.

The boys were invited on a swimming trip with a friend, which according to Clive Williams' book 'Basildon, Berkshire, An Illustrated History', was at a backwater of the Thames near a house called The Grotto, where an 8-foot trench had been dug close to the bank for sheep dipping. It appears that neither of the boys could swim and when Ernest got into trouble, his brother tried to help and their companion wasn't able to save either of them. A passing skiff's crew thought they were playacting and failed to stop.

This marble statue was erected by the family with Church Farm in the background. The family moved away a year later.

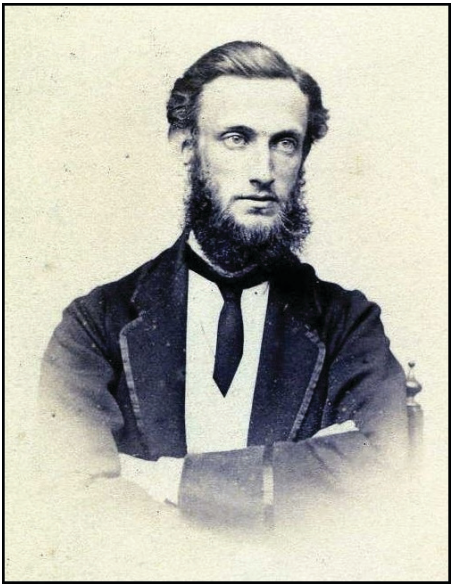


Statue to Ernest and Harold Deverell, aged 15 and 16 who drowned in a backwater of the river Thames by the Island near The Grotto in June 1886. Photo: Charis White

This tragedy has previously been mentioned as part of a talk given by Catherine Sampson to the Abingdon Team in November 2024 entitled 'A Stroll Through Berkshire's Graveyards' and noted in the March 2025 Historian. If you can catch this talk at any time, it will give a fuller account of the sad event.

Canon Arthur Hislop Drummond and All Saints Boyne Hill

Fiona Cowell *shares the life of her ancestor*



Arthur Hislop as a young man: family photograph collection, Marjorie Baylay

Arthur Hislop was born on 5th April 1843 in Old Charlton, at that time in Kent, where his father was Rector of Charlton, living in the rectory of the little church of St. Luke across the road from Charlton House, seat of the Maryon-Wilson Baronets. The Rector had had the good sense, or good fortune, to marry the daughter of the 6th Baronet, and thus one imagines had free access to the extensive park round Charlton House.

Arthur grew up in these gracious surroundings, preceded by three sisters and followed by a final one. He was sent to school at Marlborough College which had been founded the year of his birth to educate the sons of Anglican clergy, then proceeding to Christ Church, Oxford, where he studied a fairly standard course of classical texts (including Euripides, Homer and Cicero) with theology, mathematics and logic, and achieving satisfactory rather than brilliant results. He took his BA in 1867 before attending Cuddesden Theological College.

It is clear that Arthur was already attracted to the Anglo-Catholicism of the Oxford Movement because Cuddesden had been founded in 1854 as the brain-child of Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, to train graduates from Oxbridge for the priesthood, with a view to emphasising the moral conduct and theological wisdom that should attend all young men taking holy orders. The Oxford Movement which began in the 1830s was a theological movement of High-Church Anglicans initially under the aegis of Newman with the aim of reinfusing into the Church of England traditional Christian virtues, faith and energy. After Newman's conversion to Catholicism, Samuel Wilberforce (by then Bishop of Winchester) stepped in to support the continuity of the Movement without enthusiastically supporting all its ideas.

On leaving Cuddesden in 1868, three important events filled Arthur's life: he was ordained deacon, a prelude to the priesthood; he was appointed to the curacy

of Hungerford, which he later described as "my first curacy and first love", and where in addition to the existing parish church the new Church of St. Saviour's was opened that year, with Bishop Wilberforce preaching at the Dedication Service; and of great personal importance, he married Armynel Mary Baylay on 28 October. She was of another clergy family, daughter and granddaughter of vicars. A year later in 1869, he was ordained priest, their son Arthur Berkeley was born, and following closely after, Arthur was given the curacy of Long Compton (Warwickshire) where he only stayed until 1872. In that year he was at last appointed vicar: presented by Earl Beauchamp who had the gift of the living, Arthur was installed in June 1872 in Kempley, Gloucestershire, served by the little church of St. Mary's. Lord Beauchamp embarked on improvements in the parish, starting with the tiny Norman church. As reported in a local newspaper, the interior had been whitewashed (possibly during the Reformation or under Cromwell) and the renovation was due to start in autumn 1872. But as the layers of whitewash were removed traces of colouring were revealed. The local newspaper reported that "This encouraged careful and persevering efforts on the part of the Rev. Mr. Drummond, which have resulted in the uncovering of wallpaintings, almost if not quite unique in this country." Arthur's journal described his excitement at the discovery and the time he spent removing the whitewash himself. The renovations were halted by the architect in charge, who is usually given the credit for the discovery, while work continued on the frescoes. The revelation of the paintings, and their dating to 1180, caused enormous interest in national architectural and historical communities.

Not long after, continuing the improvements to the parish, the old Vicarage was exchanged under the Enclosure Act for a plot of overall similar size on which a larger house, cottage, gardens and stable were erected, with better accommodation for Arthur, Armynel, baby Arthur Berkeley, and three servants.

Arthur's heartfelt entry in the journal for October 1872 reads: "A future incumbent of Kempley will little imagine the anxiety with which the growth of the building was watched and the worry attendant on any unnecessary delay", describing "the depth of mud and dampness that surrounds the present Vicarage".

A great sadness fell on Arthur in 1876, with the death of Armynel in childbirth with her still-born daughter. Arthur's grief was such that he was given leave



Armynel Baylay: family photograph collection, Marjorie Baylay

to travel on the Continent as a distraction (with a wonderfully elaborate passport) and one imagines with Earl Beauchamp's blessing. Before leaving Kempley in 1877, Arthur commissioned a stained glass window to Armynel's memory in St. Mary's, where she is buried.

Shortly after his return, a new opportunity presented itself. One of Arthur's sisters, Jane Charlotte, had married in 1867 a son of William Gresley, the first Vicar of All Saints. The marriage was brief as Henry Scott Gresley died the following year, but in the 1871 census Jane was living in Boyn [sic] Hill with her father-in-law. William Gresley died in 1876, and bequeathed the living of All Saints to Arthur, presumably with the permission of the Bishop of Oxford, John Fielder Mackarness, thus keeping it "in the family". It must have been seen from Arthur's incumbency of Kempley that in addition to his High Church principles, he was a conscientious and caring priest, attentive to the needs of the poor and determined to improve school attendance, indeed everything required for the Vicar of Boyne Hill.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the size of the parish of Bray was making it very difficult for the vicar to serve the community, and a solution was needed to the problem of how to extend Church services and education throughout Bray. Two Misses Hulme, clergy daughters (whose father, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Reading, had been ordained by the Bishop of Oxford) saw a need for a new church properly orientated towards Anglo-Catholicism, and donated money to build a church, school and parsonage in almost any part of the Oxford diocese. The choice of Boyne Hill was made by the Bishop of Oxford (Samuel Wilberforce at the time) and on 23rd November 1855, he laid the first stone of the church of Boyne Hill, a district that in 1858 was to be cut off from Bray to become a separate parish. The choice of Gresley as the first vicar was approved by the Misses Hulme, who shared his High Church ideas,and he was installed even before the building was complete. The design had been entrusted to George Edmund Street, appointed by Bishop Wilberforce to the position of the Oxford Diocesan architect, and who had incidentally been responsible for Cuddesden Theological College. He was the premier promoter of High Victorian Gothic which matched his High Church principles, always using top quality materials and paying great attention to detail. The finished ensemble of buildings, some added a few years later and separately funded, church with spire, tower, school, vicarage, clergy houses and an almshouse, also by Street, is considered an architectural masterpiece. The church has been given Grade I status by English Heritage whilst all the other buildings are also listed - Grade 2* and 2. Street was so attached to his achievement that his wife and father in law are buried there. Street himself is buried in



View of part of the All Saints ensemble: John Maltby/RIBA Collections

Westminster Abbey.

Arthur Hislop was installed as vicar in 1876. The grandeur and comfort of his accommodation must have been a welcome contrast with the vicarage at Kempley. There was also a dramatic rise in his stipend: Kempley was valued at £14 and 4 shillings while the living of Boyne Hill was £340. Two years after Armynel's death, Arthur, still only 35, contemplated marriage again. He chose Anna Harriet Dodsworth, whose father William began his vocation as an evangelical priest but later became a leading Tractarian clergyman with whom Arthur might well have been in contact. However there was a problem: Anna had entered the lay sisterhood of All Saints, Margaret Street, and in doing so had promised obedience, poverty and chastity.

In light of subsequent events, she obviously did not consider the promise binding for life, but on the announcement of his intended marriage Arthur was the subject of extremely disagreeable reactions from his flock. He eventually took the matter to the Archbishop of Canterbury: "Our action begun in all innocence as a personal one has now assumed a most serious position; so far that I am threatened practically with withdrawal by many from my friendship and communion and in short a sort of excommunication by a certain section whom I honour and esteem."

The Archbishop's judgment was that the promise extracted from Anna was contrary to the rules of the sisterhood, and that she was free to marry if "she conscientiously believes she ought to do so". Anna evidently conscientiously believed that she should, and the marriage took place in Kensington in April 1878.

One son was born to them, Malcolm, who became a reasonably well-known artist who painted several views of All Saints, and with paintings in the Tate Gallery. His portrait of his father in old age is among his most sensitive works. In the 1881 census Arthur, Anna, baby Malcolm, six servants and the family of Anna's sister were all living in the vicarage, with Arthur's son by Armynel spending the school holidays there.

Arthur's interest in schooling had been obvious in Kempley, where four years before the first Education Act made primary education compulsory, he made valiant efforts to round up the village children in the little schoolroom, trying to engage their interest in spite of their "stupidity and inattention" of which he despaired. When he arrived at All Saints in 1876 he found himself responsible for the education at three voluntary Church of England schools, one for boys, one for girls, and one for infants, including the buildings, as well as morning and afternoon Sunday schools separately for boys and girls. The parish magazines contain much detail about the results of school examinations and church inspectors' reports.

The controversy around the second Education Act 1902 caused Arthur much deliberation. The Act aimed to rationalise primary education and in so doing incidentally provide more secure funding for Voluntary (Church) Schools. It caused a massive outcry and bitterly expressed a difference of opinion between its supporters (mainly the Conservatives and the Church of England) and its

opponents (the Nonconformists and the Liberal Party). He sought the opinion of the Bishop of Oxford, whose view was that the Act had more merits than demerits. Anyway, more security for the funding for All Saints schools was doubtless welcome. After it became law, responsibility for education was taken over by the local authority but Arthur as vicar retained a very close and formal association with them as Church of England schools.

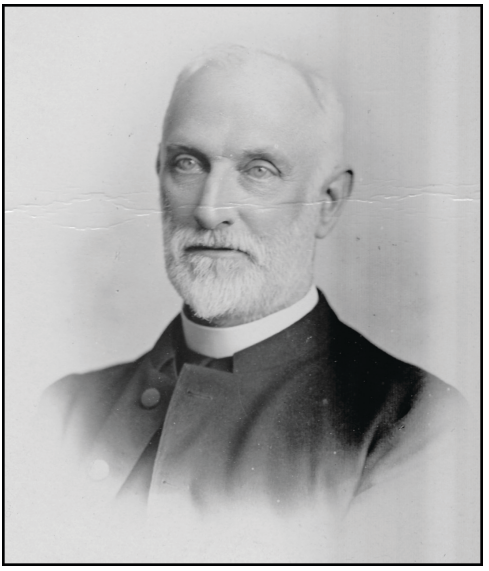
Arthur had already in 1895 set in motion the project of expanding the school buildings, and adapting the old school for infants. The teaching in these schools was praised by diocesan and government inspectors alike. In 1899, Arthur was appointed Assistant Diocesan Inspector, with the role of inspecting Church Schools in the diocese, and in recognition of his services to education Arthur was made an Honorary Canon of Christ Church in 1902. This title had only been in use since 1864, basically to honour a priest's significant contributions, long-standing service, or exemplary ministry within a diocese, without attracting a stipend. It would certainly have added to the kudos of All Saints to have a Canon as Vicar.

Arthur's subsequent life saw many changes in the parish, among them the building of St Paul's, a daughter church in Maidenhead dedicated in 1888, to replace a chapel of the same name that no longer met the needs of the growing population. In 1912 he created another daughter church – The Church of the Good Shepherd at Cox Green – again reflecting the growing numbers in the parish. At All Saints he conducted a daily service for his flock, and was later described as “a devoted parish priest, providing support for all and consolation to the afflicted”.

Apart from his abiding interest in education he liked children, although would not tolerate disorderly behaviour in church, going as far in 1882 as acting with the churchwardens to have two boys taken before the magistrate, with the comment that "a good birching would better have met the case" - a true Victorian!

In his leisure time he was a keen cricketer and founder member of the Boyne Hill Cricket Club, still going strong today. A year after the outbreak of war he was appointed Representative of the Inns of Court Officers' Training Corps.

By 1917 he felt it was time to retire and wrote a moving piece in the parish magazine, invoking his



Arthur as an older man: photo author

profound regret at leaving All Saints, the happy memories he would take away with him, and his heartfelt thanks for the "unswerving generosity, forbearance and sympathy which have so unfailingly been given me". He was presented with an illuminated address and testimonial, plus a cheque for the magnificent sum of 250 guineas (in the region of £20,000 today).

Arthur died eight years later in London, but was laid to rest in All Saints churchyard and with a splendid engraved brass tablet installed in the chancel floor.

My sincere thanks to Ken Smith, Deputy Churchwarden and historian of All Saints, who laboriously went through years of parish magazines to find information for me about the later years of Arthur Hislop's vicariate, and subsequently checked my draft for ecclesiastical errors and inconsistencies.

There is an opportunity to visit All Saints Church in November when we have arranged a tour of the church with Ken Smith. To book your place, please visit our website.

Credits
Papers in Lambeth Palace archives : Tait 237 ff. 20-25
Judith Curthoys, Archivist of Christ Church, Oxford
Gloucestershire Archives Hub

The Besley Family in Colac, Victoria, Australia

Robyn Currie, *the great-grandaughter of Magdalene Craig, tells us of her family*

In our family we have a gold fob watch which has been passed down through the generations. The original recipient of the watch was Walter Massey Besley, an overseer for Sir Charles Sladen on a property called Ripplevale, near Birregurra, Victoria. Walter was obviously held in high regard by Sir Charles. On the inside of the watch it has “Sir C.S to W.B 1875”.

Solicitor Sir Charles Sladen arrived in Victoria in 1842 from Kent and became a member of both houses of the Victorian government. He bought land near Birregurra in 1854 and established a leading Leicester sheep stud at Ripplevale in 1863.

Walter was born in Neath, Wales in June 1842 after his parents Francis Besley, a coach painter, and Isabella Finch had travelled there from England looking for work. At the time his older brother Thomas remained in Berkshire with his maternal grandparents, yeoman Benjamin Finch and his wife Ann Bright.

Looking for a better future, Francis, Isabella, Thomas and Walter Besley immigrated to Australia on a Caroline Chisolm sponsored ship, the "Athenian", arriving in Melbourne in 1852. By 1857 they were living west of Geelong, leasing a house in Colac, a town of about 20 years and with nearly 800 people. Francis continued his occupation of coach and house painter and repairer with Thomas, now 20 years of age, by his side. The roads were scarce, not sealed and at that time were not in great condition.



Figure 1 Walter Besley's watch. Bell family collection

Colac was and continues to be a service centre for the surrounding pastoral, dairy farming and timber industries. Early colonial settlers moved from Tasmania in the 1830s staking out many acres of flat and rich land for their use, ignoring the fact that the land belonged to the local aborigines.

Francis was a strong supporter of establishing an Anglican Church in Colac, raising money for clergy, witnessing baptisms and marriages throughout the parish and regularly attending services. In the 1860s he painted a board of regulations for the Colac Cemetery, and later the Irrewarra Cemetery. After 20 years in Colac Francis passed away in 1877 at age 70, and was buried in the Colac cemetery.

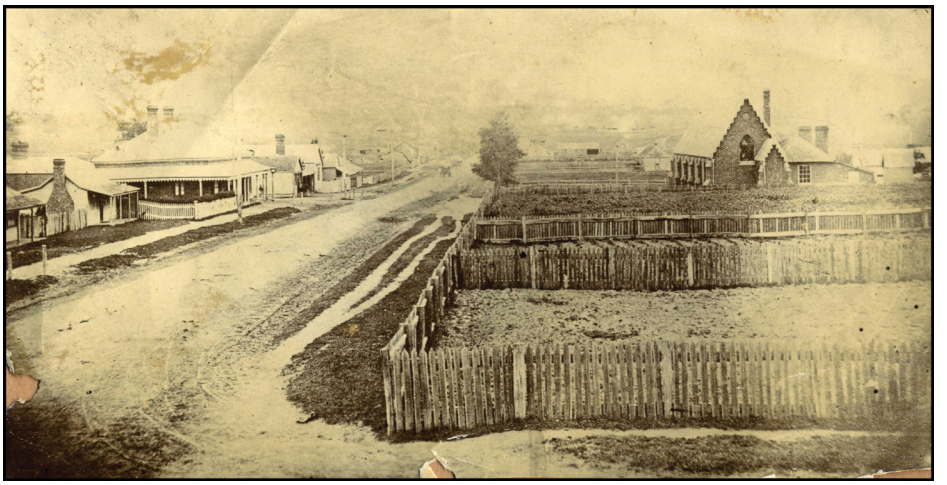


Figure 2 Besley house, possibly extreme front left, opposite the Colac school. Colac Historical Society collection

During his early years in Colac, Thomas owned a hawker's licence, he served as a juror from time to time as well as working with his father. He regularly won prizes at the Colac Agricultural Show, especially for poultry. His love of animals may have developed all those years ago back on his grandparents' farm in Berkshire. Thomas did not marry and he shared the house in Murray Street East with his mother after his father's death. Sadly, in 1882 Thomas died of cancer at just 45 years old.



Figure 3 Birregurra 1880s. Magdalene's family home second on left

It seems that Walter went straight into working on farms. Although there is no evidence of when he started working at Ripplevale, the generous gift of the watch indicates it is likely he started there at least by 1865, in his early twenties. Only about 16 miles from Colac the village of Birregurra was just taking off. It had a variety of stores, banks, hotels, and a post office. Walter was involved in setting up the Loyal Birregurra Lodge of Odd Fellows in 1864. At the time of his death, he was the Noble Grand and had been for nearly 20 years.

In July 1882 he married Magdalene Craig, a young Birregurra woman. Magdalene had an infant daughter Isabella who adopted Walter's surname. On October 23, 1882, just 3 months after his marriage, Walter and two other workers sadly drowned whilst trying to rescue sheep stranded on an island after the flooding of the nearby Barwon River.

The township of Birregurra was in mourning, but it was also a very sad time for the Mrs Besleys, both Isabella and Magdalene. Only one week before, Walter had been in Colac at the graveside of his brother Thomas. Their grief stricken mother, Isabella, now feeling very isolated with the loss of her husband and sons in just 5 years, sold up and returned to Berkshire, leaving Australia in early 1883 on Lusitania II. In June 1885 she died in Steventon, Berkshire. It is believed that her daughter Elizabeth Ann Broad lived at Steventon.

The graves of Francis, Thomas and Walter are together in the Church of England section of the Colac Cemetery. In June this year, their story will be shared because of a special project of the combined Geelong Cemeteries Trust and Colac & District Family History Group. This virtual memorialisation project locates graves of those who died before 1900, and using a phone application, will also tell a story at the gravesites of these early burials.

Robyn is interested to hear more about the Finch and Besley families from back in the 1800s and before. For instance, why did Francis have difficulty finding a job and supporting his family when his father ran a coach building business. She knows that Isabella and Francis borrowed money from Benjamin Finch in about 1843. Was there a daughter left in England when the family came to Australia? There is a reference to Elizabeth Ann Broad in Walter's probate papers. Robyn would be very excited to hear from any Finch or Besley families who recognise family members.

Sacred to the memory of

Francis Besley died March 5 1877 aged 70 years

Also his sons

Thomas Benjamin October 19 1882, aged 46

Walter Massey, October 23 1882, aged 40

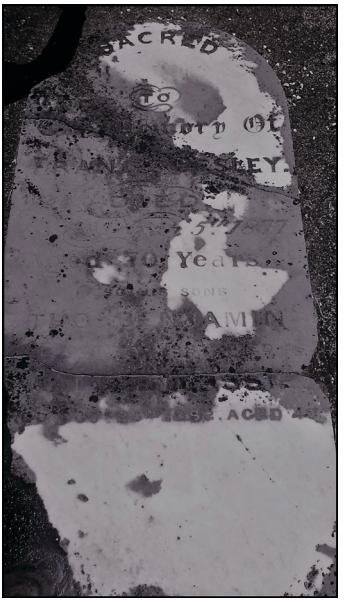
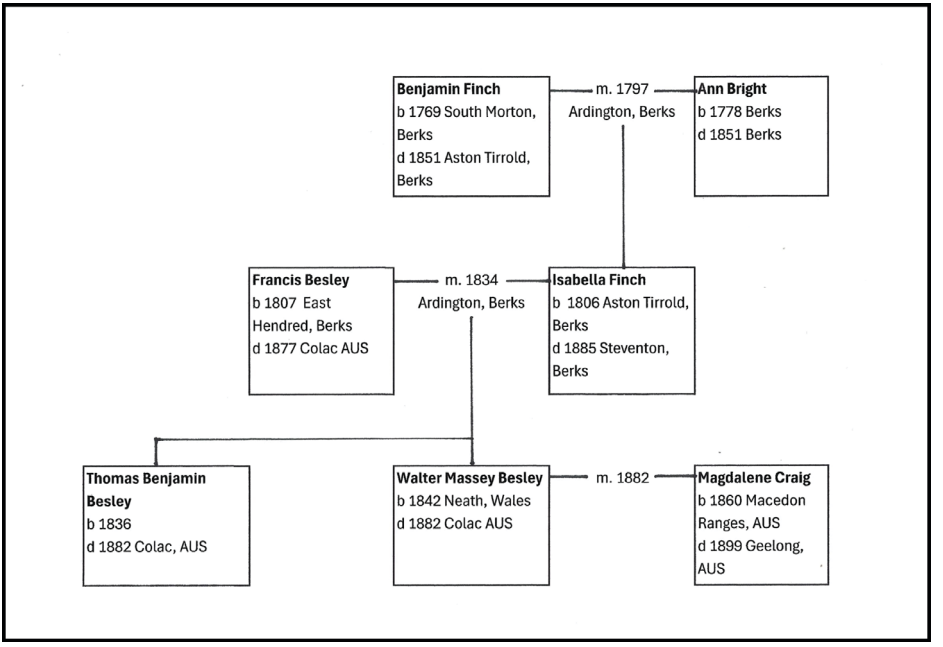


Figure 4 Gravestone of Francis, Thomas and Walter Besley. Colac Cemetery



Besley family tree

INTRODUCING FOR 2026-2027
YOUR TRUSTEES



Your new Society Chairman and Newbury team leader - Nick Prince
Nick recently retired from the civil service after 39 years. He has been researching his family since 2007 and is hoping to do more, including overseas.
He is actively involved in Thatcham Baptist Church, Theatre groups and at the Watermill Theatre. He is working on a number of projects both Family History and Theatre based.

Your new Society Vice-chairman and Reading team leader - Vicki Chesterman
Vicki has been involved with Berkshire FHS since 2005, primarily with the Reading team. She chairs the Education and Events committee and was the editor of the Berkshire Family Historian for 10 years.
She also has a keen interest in local history, being a longstanding committee member of the History of Reading Society. She tries to squeeze in her own family history research, but has not quite achieved this aim for some years now.





Your Society Secretary - Alison Pedley
Alison lives in Wokingham, but her roots are firmly in North-West England, where she was brought up. In 2009 she returned to university, graduating from University of Roehampton in 2012, MA (Historical Research) and in 2020 as a PhD. She is now a Senior Honorary Research Fellow at Roehampton. Alison joined the Berkshire Family Society while she was researching her thesis and subsequent book, about 'criminal lunatic' infanticidal mothers in Victorian England committed to Bethlem, Fisherton House and Broadmoor. Alison is well-experienced in the field of family history, having researched her own heritage and, in her academic work, the lives and backgrounds of the various subjects of her case studies.

Your Society Treasurer - Andrew Rice



Andrew qualified as a chartered accountant in 1975 and about the same time started to develop an interest in his family history. He had little spare time then, and with no internet his knowledge expanded very slowly. Workwise he moved into the charity sector in 1982 and has remained working in finance in that sector ever since. He retired from his paid charity role in 2026 but still volunteers on a regular basis. He was happy to support the Society as Treasurer for the maximum five years in the past and is glad to be back and able to continue to help in a small way. He hopes to be able to carry on his own research at the same time!



Abingdon team leader - Dave Purling

Dave retired as a Substation Engineer after 46 years in engineering. Dave has been married to Ann for 38 years and has twin adult children, James and Emma. Dave was born in Abingdon, Berkshire and has lived in Didcot all of his life. He and his wife enjoy family history and love going to shows and archives to continue their research. Dave and Ann have been members of Berkshire Family History Society for around 7 years. Dave is the convenor of the Local Teams Consultation Group.

Bracknell and Wokingham team leader - Sandra Barkwith

Sandra joined the Executive Committee in 2012 as the Representative for Bracknell branch. She became chairman of the branch in 2015. She has been a member of the Society since 1998. Currently, Sandra is Convenor of the Research Zone Committee and a member of the Education and Events Group and the Branches Consultation Group.



Windsor, Slough and Maidenhead team leader - Leigh Dworkin



Leigh Dworkin is a professional genealogist, running "Your Kin by Dworkin" and has been working on his own family tree for about 40 years. Genealogically speaking, he considers himself to be ⅝ Polish, ¼ Lithuanian and ⅛ Belarusian, judging by his great-grandparents' nationalities, which is far more interesting and exotic than being just an Essex lad.

He has been chairman of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain (JGSGB) since 2016, is a frequent speaker on topics of Jewish genealogy and family history, and has led the Windsor team of the Berkshire FHS since 2019.

He lives in Maidenhead with his wife, whose English ancestry has been traced back to a Saxon thane who owned large tracts of land in Lancashire, called Waldef of Ulverston, at the time of King Henry I and King Stephen in 1135 CE. He has an MA in Mathematics from Cambridge University and a Postgraduate Diploma in Genealogical, Palaeographic and Heraldic Studies from the University of Strathclyde.



Paul Barratt

Paul has been a member of the society since 2017. He is webmaster, convenes the Marketing and Communications group and runs the regular YourTrees workshops. He also leads the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to reduce the amount of effort required from volunteers in running the society.

Paul's Berkshire ancestors hail from the part of Berkshire that was absorbed into Oxfordshire in the 1974 boundary changes - places such as Fyfield, Cumnor, Tubney, Longworth and Kingston Bagpuize.

He now lives in Hexham, Northumberland, a few miles south of Hadrian's Wall, the northern outpost of the Roman Empire.



Vanessa Chappell
A society member since 2006, Vanessa has served in many roles, including Secretary and Abingdon team leader.
Vanessa has lived in Abingdon and been married to Duncan for 30 years and has two grown up children Robert and Nicole. When not researching her own ancestry in Wales, Birmingham, Gloucestershire and Bedfordshire, or her husband's Scottish roots, she enjoys creative paper-crafting and working in her garden. Vanessa also helps in her husband's music business 'Big Ginger Tom Music', which promotes live acoustic music and she can be found behind the bar in Harwell Village Hall on gig nights!

John Dunne
John has been researching his Irish family history since the early 1990s, including many trips back to his parent's family's homes in both Co. Waterford and Co. Kilkenny. He joined the society around the year 2000 and has been a committee member of the Computer Team for more than 20 years.
Since taking early retirement from his job as a Radiological Engineer in the NHS in January 2008 John has had more time to catch up with his Irish, American and British relatives. As his father was one of 15 children and his mother one of four children, he had many aunts and uncles and of course very many cousins to keep track of.



John and his wife Sally moved to the Reading area in 1983, from his previous home in Bracknell where he had lived since 1958 when his family left West London to start a new life in the wonderful new Town as it was then. He started working in the Civic and Industrial Scale Model Making Industry. From there he moved into the Electrical Industry, and then on to the world of X-Ray Engineering, which took him through to retirement.

YOUR VICE-PRESIDENTS

Mark Stevens
Mark is Berkshire's current county archivist. He grew up in Maidenhead and has a lifelong love of history in the Royal County. He is particularly interested in historic mental health care and the people who received it and is the author of two related books: Broadmoor Revealed and Life in the Victorian Asylum. He has been vice-president of the society since 2016.





Irene Littleby
Centenarian, Irene Littleby, became a Vice-president of Berkshire Family History Society in 2023. She has been an active volunteer since the 1980s when she began transcribing parish registers for the Society and also for the Berkshire Record Office. Many of our publications from the 1990s through to present, owe their existence in some way to Irene. Irene thrives on a challenge and particularly enjoys tackling the older and more illegible registers, even taking up Latin to extend her knowledge.

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A Combined Teams Special Online Meeting

7.45pm start (session opens 7.15pm)
14 October 2026

Read All About It! - Getting the Most from Newspapers by Dave Annal

This talk is about newspapers. But it's also about stories; about bringing our ancestors to life; about moving away from the idea that once we've discovered their names and dates, our task is complete; it's about seeing our ancestors as real, living, breathing, thinking people.



The talk will demonstrate how newspapers – specifically local newspapers – can lead us some way along this path. How, by uncovering references to the smallest, apparently insignificant events in our ancestors' lives, we can start to get glimpses of the people behind the names and dates.



Dave Annal
Dave is an experienced speaker with a large repertoire of talks, covering a variety of family history-based topics. He has spoken at RootsTech, The Genealogy Show, Who Do You Think You Are Live? and other major Family History events and have also given talks at The National Archives, London Metropolitan Archives, The Society of Genealogists and numerous Family History Societies around London and the South East and, via Zoom, to societies all around the world.
Book now to secure your place.