

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - April 2018

### A History of Shire Hall and some of its personalities

The Old Pavilion meeting room was full for Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting, when Clive Williams - formerly Berkshire County Council's County Secretary and County Solicitor, gave an entertaining and informative presentation on the history of Shire Hall and some of the personalities involved in its running.

The County Council was formed in 1889. At that time, the county town was Abingdon, and the population of the county was about 176,000 (Reading then being a separate county borough of about 100,000 people). By 1961, the county population had risen to some 400,000, and now is over double that number. At the inception of the County Council, the county's rateable value was about £1 million, and it raised around £11,000 in rates in that first year. By 1974, that had risen to a rateable value of £70 million, and £16 million was needed in rates to pay for the services provided. After the re-organisation of councils in 1974, the 'new' Berkshire was a very wealthy county, as it included the areas of Slough and Reading, which generated large sums as business rates, and so the cost of Berkshire's services came 80% from the rates, and 20% from central government. However, as some (other) councils (notably in London) had not spent their funds in a way approved of by the Government, the money raised by business rates was removed from local council budgets, to be reallocated by the Government. Clive noted that many local district councils were now 'in a mess', less than 25% of their income came from local ratepayers.

The first members of Berkshire County Council included several major landowners, such as Viscount Barrington, Lord Craven, Sir Gilbert Clayton-East, etc, whilst the Aldermen included Richard Benyon of Englefield, Sir George Robert Mowbray, and John Walter, of Bearwood.

Berkshire County Council had just 4 Clerks from 1889 until 1974. The first was John Thornhill Morland, an Abingdon solicitor, and Clerk of the Peace. Subsequently, new law courts were built in Reading, and so the county town was moved there as well, and Morland was appointed as Clerk of the County Council. Granted a pension of £1,000 per year in 1906, he continued to serve the Council, as his two deputies both joined the military in WW1. J T Morland eventually retired in his 80s - it was said that he travelled to Reading by train each day from Didcot, and it was not unknown for him to fall asleep on his return journey at the end of the day!

The land around the new courts was all owned by Suttons Seeds, who had a large repository and a row of houses facing the Forbury. The Council leased the houses for use as offices, and later bought them, using the Court Room for its meetings. A new Shire Hall was built in 1912, but it was never large enough to accommodate all the staff, and so the various council departments came to be housed in buildings scattered across Reading. J T Morland's successor as Clerk was Harold John Cooke Neobard. He was a keen collector of antiques, and was able to purchase a number of items to furnish Shire Hall. His deputy was a Welshman, Ellis Roger Davies, who succeeded Neobard as Clerk in 1951. He considered that of his £9,000 salary, "one third was for the work he had to do, one third was for seeing that his deputy did the work he should do, and one third was for being kicked when things go wrong". He was followed in 1971 by Bob Gash, who served as Clerk of 'old' County Council until 1974, and then as Chief Executive of the 'new' one until 1986. Bob had been the Deputy Clerk in Northamptonshire, and whilst on holiday he happened to meet Clive, who knew Ellis Davies was planning to retire. As a result, Bob Gash applied for, and got, the Berkshire job.

Clive also recalled several of the County Council Chairmen. Thomas Skurray held that office from 1931 - 38, and his philosophy was to "do what we must and leave alone what we may" - aiming to keep the council expenditure to a minimum". Another was William John Cumber, who was chairman from 1954 - 57, and was still on the council in the early 1970s, as an Alderman in his 90s. When a vote was put before the council to 'carve up Berkshire', he was 'dead against it' and said 'fight, fight for Berkshire' - but he was the only one. The Chairman from 1965 - 68 was Air Commodore Sir Louis Walter Dickens, who introduced a 'three year rule' - he declared that "in the first year he had no idea what to do, in the second year he enjoyed the work, and in the third year thought that 'no one else can do it as well as I can' " The 'old council's last chairman was Richard Seymour, a Reading solicitor, who was described as a "delightful chap", who had been a Japanese prisoner of war on the Burma road.

In 1974, proposals were made for local government re-organisation, resulting in the Berkshire Structure Plan. Michael Heseltine had suggested that counties consider re-arranging their boundaries for 'administrative convenience'. The deal agreed by Berkshire and Oxfordshire was to move (then) north Berkshire (Faringdon and Vale of White Horse etc) into Oxfordshire, and south Oxfordshire, around Henley, into Berkshire. However, when the detailed plan was published, although Oxfordshire gained the area proposed, Henley was to remain in Oxfordshire, with only Caversham transferring to Berkshire. Berkshire had been "sold down the river" - if they had known, they would not have agreed to the loss of the transfer to Oxfordshire. The new county crest reflected this - it being the same as the old one, except that the white horse became black, "in mourning" for the loss of the Vale of the White Horse.

At the end of 1980 it was decided to build a new Shire Hall, to bring the various departments together instead of spread across Reading - "it seemed a good idea at the time". The site was obtained at low cost from the Ministry of Defence, and the County Architect designed the building which would cost about £8 million. However, this was a time of high inflation, and consideration of the project resulted in a council meeting lasting 17 hours - probably the longest ever. By the time it was opened in April 1982, the cost had risen to £32 million. The old Shire Hall was later sold to Grosvenor Estates for £1½ million, and became the Forbury Hotel.

Clive also mentioned several incidents involving the County Council. In 1939, the Berkshire and Oxfordshire Councils purchased the privately owned toll-bridge over the Thames at Sutton Courtenay. The bridge was then made free to use, and in celebrating the removal of the tolls, some of those Council representatives 'chucked the heavy gate at the bridge into the Thames'. The resultant obstruction resulted in a sizable bill from the Thames Conservancy!! Another event arose during Clive's time with the Council. Just before one Christmas, one of the ladies of the planning department was in a panic, as a local builder planned to knock down Wallingford House over the holiday period - could Clive do anything about it? He consulted the chairman of the planning committee - could they make a building preservation order? The committee clerk then typed up the document, the official seal was got out and the 3 copies made, and he set off to serve the notice, nailing a copy to the front gate of the house, and then had to find the builder's hose at Benson, to serve the second copy there, with a warning as to what would happen if he did not comply with it. The builder showed great surprise at this - but the building is still standing! On another occasion, he recalled, the council was considering merging the county surveyor's workshop (relatively large) with that of the fire service (smaller, but better run) as part of the former. Elizabeth Samuel, chairman of the Public Protection Committee, said she felt that a decision could only be made after a site visit. She then arranged for the fire service's only tall extendable ladder to be brought from Slough. The day of the site visit was misty, but she then invited each of the councillors to go to the top of the ladder to view the site. The Chairman of the County Council went pale at the idea - and all except one of the Members declined to go up! The proposal had been defeated.

The County Council celebrated its centenary in 1989, but under the Local Government Act of 1992 was to be split into 6 unitary councils (the only county council so divided up), which took effect in 1998. Clive has written a book of Shire Hall Recalled, and this is due to be published shortly.

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday May 8th, when noted local historian Dr Margaret Simons will share some of her discoveries about Reading in World War 1, and then on Tuesday, June 12th, Ian Wheeler, the author of a recent book on Fairmile Hospital, at Cholsey, will tell about the history of this Victorian Asylum, which provided for Berkshire patients with mental health issues from 1870 until 2003.