

Wargrave Local History Society

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The History of Yeomanry House - Katie Amos

The history of Yeomanry House in Reading was the subject of Katie Amos' presentation to Wargrave Local History Society in May. Katie, who is the lead for local history at Reading Central Library, had made a special study of the house and its history.

Katie began by looking for evidence as to when the house first appeared on maps of the area. The site shows no sign of a building on the 1802 maps, but by the time the 1813 map was produced a house is included on the land at the top of Reading's Castle Hill. It was labelled as Castle Hill House – but so was another house on the other side of the road (which at one time was the Kings Arms inn). She had therefore had to be very careful in tracing the early history of the property that she was looking at records for the right Castle Hill House.

In 1802, the site is marked as a nursery, possibly belonging to the Swallow family. The Berkshire Record Office (now located on part of the site) holds the 1839 Tithe Map for the area, and that showed the occupiers then as being Harriet Sherwood. When her husband, John, died, in 1831, his will refers to 'his freehold messuage or dwelling place where I now reside', noting that he had bought it from 'Aislabie's widow'. John Sherwood had written his will in 1826. The name John Aislabie is that of the country's treasurer in the mid-18th century, but there is no record of him having a close connection to Berkshire.

John Sherwood was a surgeon, originally from Purley, and Harriet came from Burghfield, and they had been at Castle Hill House for several years, as evidenced by an advert for a lost dog in the *Reading Mercury* in 1820.

Harriet moved out in 1849, although she still owned the house, and let it to Thomas Tredwell. He was a contractor for the building of the Berks and Hants Railway, and lived with his wife, Anne, and 6 daughters there. The firm of Tredwell Brothers (Thomas with his brothers William, John and Solomon) were commended for the way they treated their horses. He also continued Mrs Sherwood's practice of allowing local schools, such as the St Mary's Sunday School, to use the part of the land for entertainments for the pupils – at which buns and negus were served (the latter being a port based drink – which may not have been for the juveniles!). At the end of the event, the *Reading Mercury* reported, the children gave three cheers for Mrs Tredwell.

The house was offered for sale in 1850, being described as a substantial property, and was bought by John Cooper, son of John Cooper the builder of Broad Street Chapel in Reading. Sadly, his wife died about a year later, and so John Cooper moved elsewhere, and the house was purchased in 1851 by Rev.d Walter Levett, (a) vicar of Bray. He died just 9 years later, but his wife, Susan (or Susanna) continued to live there until 1877, when Rev.d Frederick Anson, Walther's nephew, moved to live there. His brother – George – was Private Secretary to Prince Albert.

The next owner of the property was Edwin Jesse, who acquired it in 1880. The Jesse family were builders and developers in the Reading area (including Jesse Terrace). From documents, at the Berkshire Record Office, including architect's drawings, it appears that Mr Jesse had planned to use the Castle Hill House site in a similar way, but in the event that never happened, and in the census of 1881 the house is occupied by Joseph Bartlett, a painter – possibly one who worked for Mr Jesse

The next occupier was John Twistleton Wykeham Fiennes, who moved there from Trunkwell House at

Beech Hill, south of Reading. John was also known as Baron Saye and Sele, with a family seat was at Broughton Castle, in Oxfordshire, but it seems that their finances were such that they rented that out, and actually lived in Reading – at Castle Hill House until 1887, then moving to Sunbury House at Southcote.

As with a number of large houses in the Reading area, it then became a school. Ascham House School was run by Marian Abrams and had been established nearby for about a decade. By the end of the century, she was joined there by Thomas Penson, (later to be knighted), and the school continued there until about 1904 – latterly run by Walter Etches. At that point, the local paper reported that Portway College, run by a Miss Bath and a Miss Jones, would be moving there. They did not stay long, moving to Bath Road in about 1905.

The property still belonged to Mr Jesse, and the new tenant, from November 1906, was the army., who used it as the headquarters for the Berkshire Yeomanry. In due course, a drill hall and riding school were provided – the latter needed as Reading had become much more built-up, so there was little opportunity for the men to learn their riding skills elsewhere. The local paper then reported in 1909 that Mr Jesse then sold the property to the Yeomanry. The following year, however, the winds of a severe storm caused a tree to fall and damage part of the property – in particular the saddlery and harness room.



The front of the main house looks much the same now as it did then, with a white render finish. The rear aspect, however, is much more varied, with the bare brickwork showing, and a variety of roof heights apparent. As the headquarters of the Berkshire Yeomanry, it took on particular importance during both world wars, as Katie was able to verify from the Yeomanry's own archives.

In 1967 the military authorities decided they no longer needed Yeomanry House, and so it was sold for £39,000 to Reading Borough Council. It was hoped that the drill hall might be found a long-term use, but in due course it was demolished (making way for present Berkshire Record Office). The main use of the house was as the office for Registration of Births Deaths and Marriages, and Katie was able show some of the original architectural features that remain in rooms used for wedding ceremonies, and on the staircases, for example. Other users included the council's museum service and the Berkshire Family History Society.

However, by 2017 the council decided that the property could be sold to a nursery school, with the Registrar's department moving to Reading Town Hall. The pandemic affected those plans, and so for a while the premises were used for storage, including PPE needed due to the covid outbreak. It is hoped that a nursery school will provide for 85 pupils and 12 staff might be able to open in the near future. The Berkshire Record Office continues to acquire more archives and so it is possible that they may also need more storage space on the site in due course.

Katies' talk showed how a variety of sources (from the library collection and other sources) could be used to discover the history of a property, as well as the specific history of Yeomanry House. and prompted a number of questions from the audience.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
