

### News in brief

#### In the searchroom

- We have introduced a booking system for people wishing to visit us. Please contact us in advance if you wish to come in to use the service.
- Our library review is complete. We are still working on rearranging the remaining stock and on the sale of the stock we no longer need.

#### On-line

- 82% of our catalogues are now online.
- We are now on Facebook [www.facebook.com/bedfordshirearchives](http://www.facebook.com/bedfordshirearchives) follow us for more news and events.

#### World War One commemorations

- We are working with the Luton Culture project <http://www.worldwar1luton.com/>
- We are helping to publicize events throughout the county but we are also keen to capture the hard work that people are doing to record how the county marked the centenary.
- In July we will launch two blogs one about the Bedfordshire Home Front <http://bedshomefront.blogspot.co.uk/> and one about our soldiers in action <http://bedsatwar.blogspot.co.uk/> more about this in our Summer issue.

#### In other news

- We have welcomed a number of group visits of all ages from primary schools to the U3A.
- Bedford Architectural Archaeological & Local History Society has launched a new publication for members.
- Stagsden has a new Local History Society, developing an impressive range of activities to celebrate the parish's history.

#### Also in this issue:-

- **A Family Reunion**
- **Restructuring the Archives & Records Service**



Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service  
9 April '14

Time for our Spring Competition. Three multiple choice questions and you could be on your way to putting a piece of Bedfordshire history to a new use. We have suggested what that use could be but don't let that stop you entering if you have a different idea.

Celebrate Spring!  
Enter our competition

To enter:



## "He was always part of the family, never forgotten..."

In the twelve years that I've worked at the Archives Service, I've seen the way that the internet has revolutionised family history, making it easier to uncover fascinating stories about our ancestors and even those still living. In 2002, we had only just started to input our catalogues onto our online database. Our website consisted of basic information about the service, but not much content to help enquirers. Family history websites were in their infancy, and there were no complete indexes online for the nineteenth century census returns or the national index of births, marriages and deaths. Research involved trawling through microfiche or microfilm copies of the census, parish registers and birth, marriage and death records and took hours, and whilst rewarding, was hugely time-consuming. In 2014, at the touch of a button, and the payment of a subscription, names and dates can appear in front of your eyes and an extraordinary and life changing story can unfold in a few short hours. This is one such tale.

In 1964, Roger Allen tried to find his mother who he had never met, but was unsuccessful. He had been brought up by the Catholic Church since the age of 2, and the only record he had was his birth certificate which showed he was born at St Peter's Hospital in Bedford in February 1941 and his mother was Minnie Allen, a domestic servant who lived in Alexandra Road, Bedford. There was no father listed on the birth certificate. I was contacted by his daughter Adele Jones who asked for our help. We hold the hospital records for that period [ref: PUBV] as they pre-date the NHS. These records, due to the personal information they contain are embargoed and are not available for the public to view themselves. However, with Roger's permission, I was able to extract the information that related to him and his mother, to see if it could fill in some of the blanks. I was able to check the hospital vaccination records, the maternity register and the register of 'inmates', known by now as patients. It gave Roger's date of birth, his weight at birth, and made clear that he was illegitimate. Minnie's date of birth was provided which tied in with her age of 26. There was no next of kin listed for Minnie but I checked the GRO national index of births and discovered that she was born in Liverpool.

The GRO national index of marriages showed that a Minnie Allen was married in Bedford in 1943 to a man named Joseph Biney. If I could prove that this was the same Minnie, it could pave the way to finding out what happened to her. Checking the national index of deaths, I put the name Minnie Biney into the search engine. There was only one...and her date of birth matched. It was her!

Joseph Biney had been born in 1892, 22 years before Minnie, but his birth wasn't showing up on the national index. I put his name into the Ancestry website and struck lucky. Joseph Biney was born in the Gold Coast, now known as Ghana. Did this mean that Minnie's husband was Ghanaian or was he British, as the Gold Coast was part of the British Empire? I found that Joseph had enlisted in the British Army in 1915 in Liverpool, although he didn't see active service. He was on passenger lists to and from Ghana, so he kept up links with the country even after years of living in England. The GRO index of births showed that Joseph and Minnie had four children, Josia, Harold, Olive and Lucille, all of whom were born in Islington in London, where Joseph and Minnie had moved to after their marriage. Ancestry showed their address in the electoral registers of the 1950s and early 1960s in the St Pancras area of London. It was also where Joseph and Minnie had died, in 1972 and 1984 respectively.

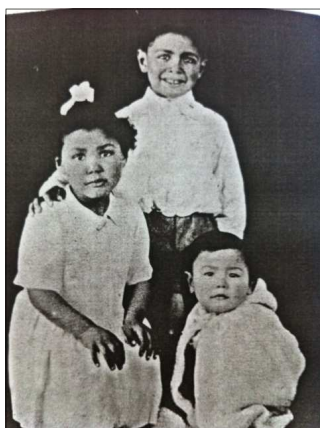
As Minnie married Joseph only two years after she'd had Roger, I did wonder whether Joseph might be Roger's father. I tentatively asked Adele if her father looked mixed race. She said yes, he did and she did too, more oriental than African, but they'd never been sure what their ethnic background was. Roger knew that he had been given up to the *Crusade of Rescue* (now known as The Catholic Children's Society) so he contacted the society and asked for his file from their archives. We had no idea what information it would contain or what details would have survived, but it proved to be well worth the wait! Roger's file gave them the answers they hoped for. It stated that Minnie had kept Roger until he was just over two years old and that his father was a Chow Tung Sung, originally of Shanghai, China. This was a revelation in itself as it confirmed their ethnic background. His father, we believe, was one of many seamen brought over by the British Government during the first and second World Wars to work in the Merchant Navy.



Minnie Allen

There was a further development. On Minnie's maternity entry at the time of Roger's birth, it stated that it was her third confinement. She already had two children. Roger now had evidence of six siblings! Alfred and Dorothy De Heer were the children of a previous relationship with a Mr Nicholas De Heer, who had died in 1939, not long after Dorothy was born. He was Dutch Afrikaans. The family had been living in north London at that time until they were evacuated to Bedford. Minnie then had Roger. Roger's parentage made him stand out and following the marriage to her new husband, it was made clear that he was only prepared to look after her and her two oldest children. A mixed race family at the time of World War Two would have undoubtedly faced difficulties; perhaps Joseph was trying to protect his family from bigotry. As the mother of mixed race children, and the wife of an African national, Minnie was unusual for her time. She would have been criticised for having a child out of wedlock and for marrying a 'foreigner'. It was no-one else's business how she lived her life, but society at that time was less accepting of things that it saw as 'different' and prejudice was rife.

Adele sent me an email stating that she hoped to find Alfred and Dorothy and soon after she rang me with the wonderful news that she had tracked them down through the electoral roll and they had even spoken to Roger on the phone. They remembered him clearly and told him that Minnie had had no other option but to give him up. She had been heartbroken and never did come to terms with the loss she felt. He had always been loved, never forgotten and never a secret. Roger also found out that his mum had also tried looking for him but without success. Dorothy sent Roger some photos of their mum and a lovely photo of Alfie, Dorothy and Roger taken shortly before he left the family in 1943 (now the earliest photo Roger has of himself). The family, including his other siblings and their families planned to meet up in September 2013, the first time they'd been together for 70 years. Roger emailed me and invited me to attend the family's reunion in Bedford, and asked if I would be the official photographer for the day. I happily accepted and two of the photos I took are below, including a recreation of the original picture of seventy years before. It was a wonderful day, very emotional and for me, a great privilege to attend. The family met again in November 2013 with Roger meeting even more relatives and he is now in the process of tracing his cousins, who he also hopes to meet one day.



Dorothy, Alfie & Roger, 1943



Family reunion in September 2013



Dorothy, Alfie & Roger, 2013

The speed with which both Adele and I found information enabling us to piece together Minnie's life was only possible due to the advancements in the internet and the sheer volume of sources that have been put online in the last few years. I wouldn't have been able to check the GRO indexes, passenger lists or London electoral registers and Adele wouldn't have been able to trace Alfie and Dorothy or email the Chinese Embassy to start the search for Chow Tung Sung. In just over a decade, the internet has made the world a smaller place, connecting people who are hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles apart, allowing access to records that previously seemed impenetrable and bringing us and our world closer together. As we embrace social media and new technology designed to help us stay in touch and be more open whilst preserving our privacy, there's the potential for other stories like Roger's to have a happy ending.

**Laura Johnson**

*N.B. This research was possible because Roger never changed his name, had a copy of his birth certificate and his Catholic Children's Society file had survived. No-one is allowed access to embargoed records, but with the appropriate authorisation, it may be possible for someone to check them for you. This type of reunion is not unheard of, but usually takes a great deal more time to research, due to the Data Protection laws in place, making people more difficult to find. We can't promise that we'll find anyone or anything but we'll do our best to advise you.*

# Archives & Records Service Restructuring

In September 2013 it was announced that Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service would undergo a restructure of its staffing to be implemented in April 2014. This was in line with other changes taking place throughout Bedford Borough Council and was also designed to take account of changes to the Senior Management Structure to come into effect in April 2015. Recruitment to posts in the new structure began in December 2014 and is expected to continue until the end of May.

## What does the new structure do?

- Consolidates Bedford Borough Council corporate information team with the Records Management team.

Although both teams have been in the Registration & Records department since 2009, the new structure unifies the team under the new post of Team Leader (Records Access). This will make for a more efficient service as the move away from paper filing continues. It also brings expertise in Freedom of Information, Data Protection and other regulatory specialisms to the service.

- Simplifies the management structure.

In 2015 the post of Head of Registration and Records is due to be amalgamated with post of Head of Member Services. This means that the span of responsibility of the then head of service will be expanded significantly and therefore it was felt that a new post of Service Manager (Archives Records) was necessary to be the senior archive professional for the service. Some will no doubt refer to this post as the 'County Archivist' in view of this responsibility.

- Gives more flexibility to the archives service support team.

We appreciate that customers like the feeling that our staff have specialist knowledge however, this has left us relying heavily on particular individuals rather than having knowledge throughout the team. This impacts negatively on the service we can provide when those with that knowledge are unavailable and makes staff without it feel less helpful. The new structure of archivists, reader support officers and customer liaison officers gives the three roles individual responsibilities but a programme of training will ensure that they all have the knowledge to work effectively and confidently to give the best possible service to customers.

- Gives greater focus to certain roles.

Over the years new service requirements, such as digitization, have been added to existing jobs. This has caused pressure on our core functions of cataloguing and conservation of the archives we hold. The new structure separates out the roles, reinstating the role of conservator, creating a pool of archivists who will work on a rota to ensure that cataloguing can be carried out efficiently, and creating a dedicated role of digitization technician as a support for all work that requires this sort of reprographics.

## Does it save money?

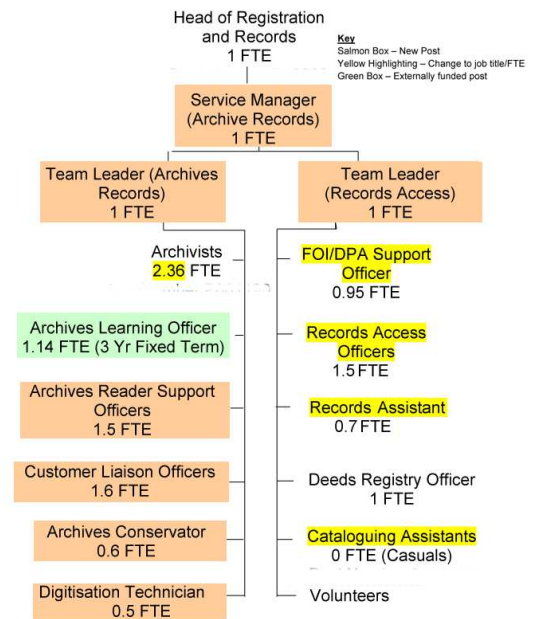
Yes, there is an overall saving to our budget and therefore to all the authorities (and tax payers) who pay for the service.

## What happened to the staff who used to work in the service?

Unfortunately the changes to the service meant that five existing staff were unable to take roles within the new structure. Four of these took redundancy, the other has been redeployed to a post elsewhere in the authority. We obviously wish them all well for the future.

## Is the new booking system a result of the restructuring?

No, the booking system has been introduced in an attempt to provide an even service to visitors by ensuring that the staff are not overstretched at certain times of the day or week.



We welcome ideas and material for future issues.

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