

OBITUARY

Miss G M A Beck, 1917-1994

To older users of records, Guildford Muniment Room and Jill Beck are a single thought. She worked in the Office for 21 years, a period during which the numbers of searchers rocketed from around a hundred each year to 1700. She continued to be welcoming and helpful, always generous with her time and her understanding of records in general as well as with her intimate knowledge of the records in her care.

Jill will be associated for ever with the Loseley Manuscripts, which she catalogued as her first piece of work after taking the post-graduate course in Archive Administration at London University. (This was in 1948-1949, only the second year the course had been run. Jill was a pioneer archivist). 'In a way I was spoiled', she told the *Surrey Advertiser* on her retirement in 1982, 'I got the best job in my first job'. She later catalogued much else at Guildford, and all those interested in the history of Surrey are indebted to her for the accuracy and care of her descriptions and her indexing. As a colleague now in Chichester has written 'Jill's work was of the highest possible standard, and all her successors know that any note about the documents in her own unmistakable hand, or typed on her very elderly typewriter, is completely reliable. One makes all sorts of exciting discoveries in the documents, only to find that Jill discovered them 30 years ago. Her work still provides the solid platform on which others build'.

Geraldine Marie Angela Beck was born in Ilford of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, both Irish. She was brought up, and remained always, in her mother's faith. An exhibition took her in 1936 from the Ursuline High School in Ilford to read history at St Hilda's College, Oxford. She next started a BLitt on the Ulster Plantation, but the war intervened, and she worked in the Ministry of Food (1941-1946) and then the Institute of Statistics (1946-1948). The rigorous office systems she learned in the civil service were, she used to say, the basis for what was put into effect in her office at Guildford.

In 1950 she was employed by the Historical Manuscripts Commission to complete the drying and fumigating, and cataloguing, of the manuscripts from Loseley House which Mr More Molyneux had deposited in Guildford Muniment Room. They had suffered from damp during unheated wartime storage, and Jill would sometimes say later that hanging them out on the line to dry was the most enjoyable task of her entire career in archives! It was a big task, and resulted in a catalogue in two fat volumes.

Her next job was with the records of the Petworth Estate, which included parts of Yorkshire and County Clare, and Cumberland iron mines, as well as the Sussex properties. She – and the estate office cat – spent eight years in a cold semi-underground room with a view of gravestones. Nonetheless, as her successor reports, 'the amount of material was enormous, but her work rate was prodigious'.

When increasing accessions of records necessitated the building of two further strong rooms at Guildford, more help was also needed. In 1961 Jill was happy to return as assistant archivist to Miss Enid Dance, who then occupied the post of joint museum curator and archivist. They had become firm friends during the work on the Loseley MSS. The County Council paid the new assistant archivist's salary, and soon after Dr Dance's retirement in 1970 the Muniment Room became a branch office of the County Record Office. Jill was archivist-in-charge at Guildford for eleven years.

Because of the history of the custody of the Surrey Archaeological Society's research material, the archivist at Castle Arch was inevitably familiar with it, (as also with the Museum's graphic collections). Jill served for some years on the Library Committee, and was always at hand and willing to help out those listing or looking for material, whether they were

professionals or amateurs. She gave useful professional advice on storage and conservation methods when these matters became urgent concerns of the Society's librarian.

After her retirement Jill became involved in good works of many kinds. She was for a time the secretary of the Guildford Cyrenians, and also worked for Books on Wheels for the Disabled, Amnesty International and, together with Felix Holling, the former museum curator, manned a Guildford outpost (if not HQ) of the Cats' Protection League. In these last years, however, she returned to her first and best love, the Loseley Manuscripts. Not long before she retired Mr More Molyneux added to his deposit the boxes of unbound correspondence. After she retired, and with a band of dedicated transcribers, Jill spent every Monday in the Muniment Room. The complete transcription of all the 16th and early 17th century letters, with a catalogue, was far advanced when she found – only a few weeks before her death – she could no longer manage it.

It is a very great loss that she was not able to finish the work. Hampered in her career by a lifelong stammer, she was on paper a stylist of great elegance. Perhaps the acute critical sense which made her proof-reading skills earn her the title of 'the eagle' was too keenly, and unjustly, turned against her own work (as never unkindly against that of others). Unfortunately she seldom wrote anything more extended than the letters so welcomed by all her friends. The hopes that she would at last put her huge knowledge of the Loseley collection on paper have been disappointed.

At work or at play, she was a companion without compare and, a year after her death, is still sadly missed. Her unworthy successor here salutes a master, teacher and friend.

Nihil quod tetigit non ornavit