2018 marked the 20th anniversary of the creation of Surrey Heritage and the opening of its new headquarters, Surrey History Centre, in Woking. It was also the 70th anniversary of the appointment of Surrey County Council’s first professional archivist in 1948.

To mark the anniversary, 70 of Surrey History Centre’s users, depositors, volunteers, partners, supporters and staff (past and present) were invited to nominate their favourite document or archaeological find with the reason for their choice.

Dr Sue Hawkins, Honorary Research Fellow, History, Kingston University, chose the Royal Philanthropic Farm School Registers: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 and John Gibbons. SHC ref 2271/10/16.

**Royal Philanthropic Farm School Registers: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 (2271/10/16)**  
Page 237

**Slide 2**

John Gibbons can’t quite bring himself to meet your eye. He stares out of the page, a little boy in crumpled clothes, grubby hands clutching nervously at his trousers. Who is he? And why is his photograph to be found in a large leather-bound book held at Surrey History Centre. The book is a Register of Admissions to a truly Victorian institution – The Royal Philanthropic Society’s Farm School at Redhill in Surrey.

**Image:** John Gibbons’ entry in the Royal Philanthropic Farm School Register: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 (SHC ref 2271/10/16, folio 237B). Text about John, his family and his conduct at the school.

**Slide 3**

The Royal Philanthropic Society had a long history; founded in London in the late 18th century, it was intended for boys and girls who had been convicted of crime. Originally based in Southwark, in 1849 the school moved to Redhill, where it would specialise in training boys only in agricultural work.

The school was open to any boy, under the age of 16 who had been convicted of an offence for which the punishment was at least 14 days in gaol. If the magistrate saw fit, he could require the boy, on completion of the original sentence, to be sent to a Reformatory, such as the School at Redhill, for a period of anywhere between 1 and 5 years.

**Image:** The Philanthropic Society School at Redhill [mid 19th cent] (SHC ref PX/123/28), view of the school buildings.

**Slide 4**

Surrey History Centre holds a comprehensive collection on the Redhill institution, including admission registers, annual reports and minute books. But it was the Admission Registers which caught my eye! Each boy admitted to the school was given a two-page report in the register, which includes an account of his time at the school, but also contains (in many
cases) detailed notes of his family background, previous offences, physical appearance and what happened to him in the years after his release. Making them even more exciting for me, records from the late 19th century are frequently accompanied by photographs of the boys. The registers thus provide (in a single source) incredible and rare insight into the lives of these very disadvantaged children. Which is where we started – when I was flicking through the register for 1871-1875 the image of John Gibbons leapt off the page and drew me into this incredible resource.

**Image:** John Gibbons’ entry in the Royal Philanthropic Farm School Register: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 (SHC ref 2271/10/16, folio 237A). Text about John and his conduct at the school.

**Slide 5**

John was admitted to the school on 19th June 1874. He was 13 years old, and already familiar with the inside of prison, having been jailed only a few months earlier for the great crime of stealing chestnuts. This experience seemed to have little impact on his behaviour, and on 20th March 1874 he was in court again, accused of stealing two shillings and six pence [2/6d – pre decimal currency] from a shop till. The magistrate clearly believed John needed a tougher lesson. He was sentenced to 3 months in Maidstone County Gaol, and on release he was to go to The Royal Philanthropic School at Redhill for a period of 5 years. Look at his picture again, I think I can see a hint of defiance (or even cockiness) in his sideways gaze and an upright stance in his chair? Is he thinking ‘what suckers, I managed to survive in adult prison and now they send me back to school!’

**Image:** Close up of John Gibbons’ entry in the Royal Philanthropic Farm School Register: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 (SHC ref 2271/10/16, page 237). Image of John and text about him, his family and his conduct at the school.

**Slide 6**

The register’s description paints a picture of John as undersized for his age, of a rough & ruddy complexion with brown hair, dark grey eyes, and a small but straight nose. His front teeth are ‘flat’ and he has a scar over his right eyebrow and one on his forefinger. The report observes his tendency to chew his teeth when at rest.

John has had some schooling: he could read to reasonable extent but his writing and arithmetic were basic. When he was arrested he had already left school and was working with his father, a gardener in a plantation and a man of reputedly good character. The report lists members of his family, including parents, siblings, uncles and grandparents, by name.

**Image:** Photograph of John Gibbons from the Royal Philanthropic Farm School Register: volume Sept 1871 –June 1875 (SHC ref 2271/10/16, folio 237B).

**Slide 7**

The report then continues with an account of his time at the school. It has to be said that the large majority of these entries record punishments meted out to John. Less than a
month after arriving, he was birched and confined in the punishment cell for a day, for leaving the farm without permission. In the same year, he was caned for idleness and lying four times and confined in the cell again, for stealing. I am afraid this pattern of behaviour continued for the four years he was at Redhill.

However, his big break came in December 1877. Reverend Boodle (listed in John’s record as ‘his friend’) wrote that Mr Phillips, a miller and farmer in West Malling, would offer the boy employment. Boodle even offered to keep an eye on him, commenting that he knew John’s family well, and thought they offered him no good example. By September 1878 John was sent to work on Mr Phillips’ farm.

**Image:** The Royal Philanthropic Society's Farm at Redhill 1851 (SHC ref PX/123/27), view of the school buildings with a group of people seated in the foreground.

**Slide 8**

Phillips and Boodle wrote several times expressing satisfaction with John, and John himself wrote a couple of times to say he was doing OK. But in summer 1879, he seemed to become unsettled, and as his five-year term expired Mr Phillips’ patience with John was exhausted – ‘Gibbons has left my service’, he wrote, ‘impossible to do anything with him since his term ended’. And for two months John was out of work and wrote for money, but in early 1880 he wrote that he had joined the Navy, as a stoker, and on the 28th September that year he wrote one last time, saying he had set sail from Portsmouth on HMS Kingfisher for Callao in Peru. John’s school record ends here, though there’s a lot of information in it which would enable a family historian to find out more about what happened next.

John’s record is not unique. The detail in these Registers (of past crimes, behaviour at the school and fate on leaving), offer a unique insight into the boys at the centre of the ‘juvenile crime panic’ in 19th century England. While some were clearly rogues in the making, others found a new way at the School and went on to become upstanding members of society. It is the wealth and detail of these personal stories, accompanied by alluring photographs, which makes this source, for me, hard to beat. Open the registers at any page and stories of pathos and survival against the odds emerge.

**Image:** Photograph of boys in the tailor's shop at the Royal Philanthropic School, Redhill 1890s (SHC ref Z/574/1/2)

**END**

Read more about the Royal Philanthropic Society School on the Exploring Surrey’s Past website:
https://www.exploringsurreyspast.org.uk/themes/subjects/schools/royal_philanthropic_society

For more information about these registers and to find out about the other fascinating collections held at Surrey History Centre in Woking visit:

Main website: https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/culture-and-leisure/history-centre
On-line catalogue: https://www.surreyarchives.org.uk/

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