

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2014 - 3 April 2015

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 6 May 2015

Summary

Enormous progress has again been made during this, the fourth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum, and it has been another very successful year for the Archives. The major achievements since April 2014 have been:

- A continuing enthusiastic uptake by readers during the second year of the City Archives Reading Room;
- The beginning of a listing programme thanks to a greatly increased number of volunteers; and
- The remounting of the City Charters.

Once again, a caveat concerning the success of the promotional strategy is that it has proved hard to cope with demand, given the resources available. This will be ameliorated from April 2015 by the additional funding provided by the City Council, which extends the Archivist's hours by an additional half day per week. The major targets for 2015-16 are:

- (a) To increase the number of reader slots;
- (b) To improve response time to written enquiries; and
- (c) To progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online.

The Archivist wishes to acknowledge the invaluable support and encouragement she has received from the Honorary Curator of the Museum.

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been open for two years. The regular readers' slot has continued to be on a Tuesday morning, with visits by prior appointment only. The excellent response to the raised public profile of the Archives continues, with a record number of reader visits and enquiries during the last year.
- Between 4 April 2014 and 3 April 2015, there were 66 reader visits and 97 enquiries were received. This compares with 57 reader visits and 84 enquiries between 4 April 2013 and 3 April 2014. The Archivist also led several tours of the City Archives, including one for the City Council's Archives Committee.
- Nearly three quarters of the requests for visits and enquiries came via the Museum, and the rest via the City Council. This represents a continuation of last year's pattern and probably reflects a greater awareness of the presence of the City Archives at the Museum.
- Readers researched subjects ranging from Wells Bicycle Club to crime in nineteenth-century Wells.
- Examples of the types of enquiry received are: (a) local history (including that of the City Council), e.g. markets and the Recreation Ground; (b) family history; (c) house or building history, regarding properties such as the Guardhouse and the Carlton Mews site; (d) mapping enquiries, e.g. concerning the St Cuthbert's tithe maps; (e) photographic enquiries, for instance, a request for an image of Mr Hucks' flight between the towers of the Cathedral in 1913. There have been several research enquiries requesting information for TV programmes (such as one on the Monmouth Rebellion and another on surviving World War Two defensive buildings in the area). Several specialists in the history of showmen and fairground travellers have been very excited to discover the Archives' rare collection of correspondence from showmen.
- Of the enquiries, 59% concerned local history, 19% family history, and 12% house or building history. The remaining 10% were academic or specialist in nature. This compares with 37%



concerning local history, 25% family history, 19% house or building history, and 19% academic or specialist in nature between 4 April 2013 and 3 April 2014.

- There is a large backlog of research enquiries awaiting a proper response (beyond an email acknowledging receipt of the enquiry).
- In order to deal with this, the Archivist needed to recruit a volunteer to help her respond to enquiries. She managed to do so in April 2015.

2. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The Archivist has continued raising public awareness of the collection through outreach work such as events, talks and exhibitions. She has also submitted numerous stories to the local press and promoted the City Archives on the Museum and City Council websites. Collaboration with the journalist Clare Blackmore has been extremely valuable.

3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

The Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on 13 September 2014. This was the first time the Town Hall has participated on a Saturday and the event was a huge success, with a record number of visitors (372 in all). Dr Wood mounted displays of material from the City Archives. These included 'The Council at War' (commemorating the First World War), inns and pubs of Wells, the history of the Town Hall, and the court in Wells.

She organised a range of other activities and displays too. She created the concept of the 'Wells History Map', which allowed people to come and participate in building up the history of the city by sticking Postits on a large-scale map. Visitors were also able to find out about an exciting digital mapping project called "Know Your Place – West of England". The Project Officer demonstrated how this will help people to explore their neighbourhood through historic maps, images and linked information. Another activity enjoyed by visitors was having a nostalgic stroll along Wells High Street in the year 2000. This was made possible by Wells Civic Society's loan of huge panoramic photos which were taken of the entire High Street to mark the Millennium. There were also films of local interest (made by Michael Green) and exhibitions by Wells Railway Fraternity and Janet and Peter James (the latter bringing to life some of the historical paintings). Visitors were offered a 'Self-Guided Tour of the Town Hall' created by the Archivist.

4. "Weird and Wonderful Wells"

The Archivist was on the organising committee for a children's history festival entitled "Weird and Wonderful Wells". It took place on 17 August 2014, and resources from the City Archives were used to support it. The event featured "hairy histories and scary stories of the smallest city in England". Visitors were invited to the Town Hall, and the Archivist created a children's tour and quiz entitled "Explore the Hairy Histories at Wells Town Hall". There were 200 visitors to the Town Hall during the two hours it was open. Altogether 2,500 people came to Wells for the event (figure from Chris Winter, Chair of Wells Civic Society, who initiated the event).

5. "Know Your Place – West of England"

This project (mentioned above) has applied for Stage 2 Heritage Lottery funding. The Archivist has arranged that, if this is granted, the unique 1860 Sewerage Map of Wells will be digitised as part of the project. She has also indicated that the City Archives would like to participate in the project.

6. "Wells Remembers"

The City Archives is participating in "Wells Remembers", a project to mark the centenary of the Great War. The project is being coordinated by a partnership between the Blue School and Wells Cathedral School, Wells Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, Wells City Archives, the Wells Journal, the Wells branch of the Royal British Legion and the Wells & Mendip Museum. The project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Archivist researched and created an extensive display which forms part of the "Wells Remembers" initiative. It opened at Wells Town Hall on 5 August 2014, and focusses on the Council at War. It tells the stories of three Mayors of Wells and how the war impacted on them and their families. The part played by the City Council and the Town Hall is also illustrated, along with the impact of the war on the citizens of Wells, using contemporary documents preserved in the City Archives. Specially loaned

artefacts such as a 'death penny' are also featured, some lent by the Museum and some by members of the public.

Dr Wood has organised two "Wells Remembers" drop-in sessions at the Museum.

7. Exhibitions

During the year, the Archivist created several exhibitions of material from the City Archives for display in the Town Hall. On a small scale were displays on the court, the City charters, the history of the Town Hall and the arrival of the High Sheriff. On a large scale is the "Wells Remembers" display mentioned above. The official opening of the 2014 May Fair was followed by a gathering at the Swan, at which there was a display put together by Richard Green, including reproductions of rare items he had discovered in the City Archives.

Preparation has commenced for a joint Museum and Archives exhibition entitled "Firefighting in Wells", which will open at the Museum on 8 August 2015. Volunteer Paul Pickford is organising this, assisted by Dr Wood and volunteers Jon Chivers, Janet Rodger, Tony Lee and Clare Blackmore. Also undergoing preparation (this time by volunteer Adam Humphreys) is a new display for the City Archives case in the 'Wells Room' at the Museum. It will be on seals, including the City seals, and will showcase some of the seals from the collection.

The Harry Patch portrait belonging to Wells City Council has continued to be on temporary loan to the Museum throughout the year, and has been on public display during much of this time.

8. Talks on the City Archives

During 2014-15, the Archivist gave talks on the City Archives to the Somerset Churches Trust, the Wells Natural History and Archaeological Society, and Avalon Rotary Club. The new Mayor invited the Archivist to speak briefly at Mayor Making in May 2014, and she talked about the water of Wells and displayed the Bekynton Charter (dating from 1451).

9. Storage and organisation of the Archives in the Museum's Strong Room

Work continues on reorganising and listing the location of the bound volumes.

10. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

At the Museum's request, the Architectural Liaison Officer of the Avon & Somerset Constabulary (Somerset East District) has recently carried out an inspection of security at the Museum, as part of the accreditation process. Certain security measures are being upgraded as a result of his recommendations.

11. Conservation and preservation issues

A rolling programme of remounting the City Charters is almost complete. The majority of them are held in place within their boxes by strings or threads which do not allow them to 'breathe' and are no longer considered a suitable method of securing them. The Senior Conservator at Somerset Heritage Centre is replacing the unsuitable threads with polyester archive-quality film strips. 22 of the charters have been remounted during the year, and the final 10 which need remounting have been delivered to the Conservator. He has also made presentation boxes for the three twinning charters.

The Archivist continues to monitor environmental conditions in the Strong Room using a 'Tinytag' data logger, and the necessary action is being taken to ensure appropriate conditions. A condition audit of the volumes in the collection has been started.

12. Cataloguing

In January 2015, Dr Wood initiated monthly box-listing sessions with a group of volunteers. They list the contents of previously unsorted boxes of archives and their help is already making a big difference. So too is that of volunteer Austin Little, who has created a digital catalogue of Sacrament Certificates, and has now begun a pilot project on the 'Informations before the Borough Justices'. Up until now, there has been little time in which to continue with Stage 2 of the cataloguing strategy, which comprises adding summary details of the contents of the boxes which have not yet been listed. Stage 3 will be delivering

internet access to the Summary Catalogue. It is still planned to deliver this in the three ways which were described in the last Annual Report.

13. Digitisation

Museum volunteer Steve Tofts continues to photograph items from the City Archives, providing images for use in exhibitions and by researchers. The Archivist is building up a digital collection of images of Wells and area, comprising scans of photographs generously loaned for this purpose (for instance, by Mike Baker).

14. Volunteers

The number of Archives volunteers has grown considerably over the last year. They are playing a vital part in many aspects of work associated with the City Archives, including archives development, promotion, exhibitions, and events. Without their invaluable and generous assistance, far less would be happening, and their help is hugely appreciated by the Archivist. Many thanks to Jeff Allen, Clare Blackmore, Lorna and Mike Brooks, Clive Charlton, Jonathan Chivers, Sue Curragh, Brian Curran, John Hazell, Adam Humphreys, Janet James, Hilary Kitcher, Tony Lee, Dick Laurence, Austin Little, David Mather, Wendy Osterman, Paul Pickford, Janet Rodger, Steve Tofts and Norman Woollard. Numerous other people (including City councillors) have kindly helped too, particularly with the HODs event.

15. Development of relationships with external bodies

During the year, the Archivist has continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Curators' and Archivists' Group (which has been hosted at the Museum), and the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group. She has also liaised with the Cathedral, Cathedral School and Bishop's Palace Archivists. One of the City Archives volunteers has responded to the Friends of Somerset Archives' request for assistance with their Tithe Transcription Project. Dr Wood has been consulted by the Civic Society concerning suggestions for additional blue plaques in Wells.

16. Training and conferences

Dr Wood attended a TNA/RLUK conference on "Discovering Collections, Discovering Communities" and a Somerset Learning Forum course on "Working with Communities".

17. Future targets

During 2014-15, the progress made over the previous three years has been consolidated. Archives development work has continued during the year, and attention has been given to basic archival procedures such as preservation and listing. The promotional strategy has been highly successful, but it has again proved hard to cope with demand. It is excellent news that from April 2015, sufficient additional funding will be provided by the City Council to extend the Archivist's hours by an additional half day per week. This will allow her more time in which to deal with the major targets for 2015-16, which are: (a) to extend public access by increasing the opening hours of the Reading Room; (b) to improve response time to written enquiries; and (c) to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online.