

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2016 - 3 April 2017

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 20 July 2017

Summary

This has been the sixth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum, and once again, it has been very busy and successful. There has been much work on exhibitions and promoting the Archives through these, and on digitisation projects, which will make the Archives even more accessible. The great contribution made to the Archives over the year by the large team of volunteers is gratefully acknowledged. The Archivist also wishes to acknowledge the invaluable support and warm encouragement she has received from the Honorary Curators of the Museum, first Barry Lane and then his successor, David Walker. Barry retired as Curator during 2016, and the Archivist wishes to pay special tribute to him for his dedication and for all the time and expertise he devoted to the Museum.

The major achievements in the City Archives since April 2016 have been:

- Receiving a vastly increased number of readers during the fourth year of the Reading Room;
- Continuing valuable Archives development work, particularly through the listing programme;
- Finalising the unique digital Archives resources for release online; and
- Preparing, presenting and collaborating on numerous exhibitions: a City Archives exhibition; a major joint exhibition; and regional digital and touring exhibitions.

These focuses mean that there has been little time to work on the Summary Catalogue. So the major target for 2017-18 is to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online, thereby making the Archives more accessible (whilst continuing to welcome Archives readers and written enquiries). The online digital resources will also go live this year.

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been open for four years. There has once again been a record number of reader visits during the last year.
- Between 4 April 2016 and 3 April 2017, there were 140 reader visits and 80 enquiries were received. The Archivist also led 7 tours of the City Archives.
- 75% of the requests for visits and enquiries came via the Museum, and the rest via the City Council. This continues the pattern of previous years.
- Readers researched subjects including the Bishop's Barn, the Isolation Hospital, the Loxton family and Wells Petty Sessions. Examples of the types of written enquiry received are: (a) local history (including Henry VII's visit to Wells, the Mercers' Company, and Wells Central School's history); (b) family history; (c) house or building history, including properties such as Orange Grove Nursing Home; (d) mapping enquiries; (e) photographic enquiries, for instance, a request for images from Phillips Photographic Studio.



Group from Kluczbork, Wells' Polish Friendship Town, visiting the City Archives with Wells Twinning Association, October 2016

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- Of the reader visits, 81% concerned local history, 3% family history, and 14% house or building history; the remaining 2% were specialist in nature. Of the written enquiries, 45% concerned local history, 27% family history, and 14% house or building history; the other 14% were specialist in nature (including giving advice on the Wells Literature Festival Archive).
- 90% of reader visits were by members of the general public, 4% by academics or students, 2% by non-academics intending to publish, and 4% by archivists and heritage professionals. As for written

enquiries, 91% were from members of the general public, 4% from academics or students (including professors, postgraduates and undergraduates), 1% from local press, and 4% from non-academics intending to publish.

- The majority of readers came from Wells and the Mendip area, but there were visitors from Bristol, Portishead and Spain. Nearly all the written enquiries came from Britain, but there were also emails from Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Canada.

2. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The Archivist has continued to ensure a high public profile for the Archives. She is extremely grateful to Clare Blackmore for the productive collaboration on *Wells Journal* pieces. The Archivist has also carried out varied outreach work, including talks, events and exhibitions. As an example of the international audience to which awareness of the City Archives has extended, in April 2016, the American Professor Gary Shaw (author of a book on medieval Wells) presented a paper at the University of Chicago on the early Wells Convocation Act Books, and told the Archivist that “the workshop I presented at was roughly ⅓ specialists of China, ⅓ specialists of India, and the others mainly worked all over the Western world, and it was strange to see how unusual these scholars of fancy Sanskrit and Confucian texts found the Wells material”.

3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

Once again the Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on 10 September 2016. There was an incredible, record-breaking total of 585 visitors. Dr Wood had organised various displays showcasing material from the City Archives. In particular, there was a brand new exhibition, researched and written by volunteers, on “Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells”. Other Archives displays at the event included “The Circus Comes to Town!”, two medieval charters, historic images of the Town Hall, and “The Court in Wells”. The Archivist had also arranged for further displays of local interest to be mounted by other groups and individuals; the subjects of these included the Wells Charter Fairs and railways of Wells.

4. “Know Your Place – West of England”

This is a Heritage Lottery funded digital mapping project, in which Wells City Council is a project partner. The Archivist arranged for the unique 1860 Sewerage Map of Wells to be digitised as part of the project, and the City Archives has been supplied with a digital copy of this. The map will be added shortly to <http://maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp/?edition=som>. During the year, the Archivist contributed to the “Know Your Place – West of England” online and touring exhibitions, so that material from Wells City Archives was incorporated in these. The online exhibition is on display at www.kypexplore.com/en/. The touring exhibition was on display at the Bishop’s Palace from 2 March to 2 April 2017.

5. Exhibitions

This has been a year of exhibitions. For instance, Wells City Archives includes a large needlework panel illustrating the local legend of Bishop Jocelin and the Worminster Dragon, and this embroidery was included in the Museum’s exhibition entitled “Simple and Beautiful”, which ran from 11 June to 2 July 2016. During the year, a new display of Phillips photographs was launched at The Crown Hotel, and the Archivist contributed to this. An exhibition entitled “Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells” was prepared for and premiered at Heritage Open Day 2016. It was based on data brought to light by volunteers at the monthly Archives Box-Listing Sessions run by the Archivist at the Museum. It attracted very positive feedback, and the Archivist arranged for it to go on show again at Wells Museum, from 30 March to 26 April 2017. At Wells Town Hall, the Archivist created several exhibitions using material from the Archives. These included a display of original documents after the Mayor Making ceremony on 21 May 2016, featuring some of the recently conserved items (such as the Royal Letters Patent containing Ordinances referring to Wells Corporation and City Companies, c. 1662).

Much work has gone into preparation for the joint exhibition “Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells”. This is a collaboration between Wells City Archives, Wells & Mendip Museum and the Bishop’s Palace. It will run at the Bishop’s Palace from 6 May to 31 October 2017. The City Archives items which will be included are the King John Charter (1201), the Bekynton Charter (1451) and the Queen Elizabeth I Charter of Incorporation (1589). A full-size reproduction of the 1860 Sewerage Plan of Wells (in two parts) will also be on display. This is a fantastic opportunity both to work collaboratively and also to showcase some of the Archives’ great treasures. Preparation is also underway already for a major exhibition entitled “Firefighting in Wells and the Mendips”, and the Archivist has been involved in this.

The exhibition will run at the Museum from 5 August to 13 September 2017. It is a collaboration between the City Archives, the Museum, and a team of volunteers, with Paul Pickford as Researcher and Janet Rodger as Exhibition Coordinator. Like its very successful 2015 predecessor, it will involve the local community.

6. Talks on the City Archives and tours of the Archives

During 2016-17, the Archivist gave talks to Mendip Postcard Club, the Wells U3A History Group, the Friends of Westbury Church, the Street Society and Glastonbury U3A, as well as speaking briefly at Mayor Making in May 2016. The seven tours of the Archives which she conducted included several for Museum volunteers. In October 2016, she and Jonathan Chivers welcomed to the City Archives four visitors from Kluczborg, Poland, with whom Wells has a Friendship Agreement, along with the Chairman and Secretary of Wells Twinning Association. They presented to the visitors a "History of Wells through 12 Archives Documents", which was very well received.

7. City of Wells Galleries

The City Archives will be playing an important part in the establishment of the new galleries at the Museum, which will tell the story of the history of Wells. The Archivist has a significant role in the development of the project.

8. Loans and deposits

A notable loan was of the Archives' Chernobyl Liquidator's Medal, which was lent to the Children of Chernobyl Fund, Wells, for display at their event to mark the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. The event took place on 1 May 2016. The medal was awarded to Vitaly Tarasov, who was one of the second wave of responders. He donated the medal in 2006, as a sign of his gratitude for the work carried out for 20 years by the Children of Chernobyl Fund, Wells, in arranging recuperative holidays for the children of Chernobyl. A welcome donation to the City Archives this year was that of Kate Fry's papers from her Mayoral year (1993-94). These include photographs, programmes of civic events and recordings. The oral history project created by Strode undergraduate Will Dawe was another valuable deposit, containing interviews with the then Mayor, Cllr Chris Briton, and the Town Clerk, Felicity White.

9. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

Security measures are being kept under review.

10. Conservation and preservation issues

The South West Heritage Trust's Head of Conservation, Mervyn Richens, completed work on several more prioritised items from the Archives. This included reuniting the (recently discovered) missing part of the Great Seal of Queen Elizabeth I with the rest of the seal (on City Charter No. 28).

Regular monitoring of environmental conditions in the Strong Room continues, and the necessary action is being taken to achieve appropriate conditions.

11. Cataloguing and listing

A group of ten volunteers has continued the monthly Archives Box-Listing Sessions during 2016-17. They have finished recording a 25-year period of Petty Sessions papers for Wells, from 1850-1874. This very rare collection formed the basis for the "Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells" exhibition. Volunteer Austin Little has entered the details in an Excel database, as well as transcribing and digitising the data from several of the Corporation's property registers. Wells history expert Tony Scrase has kindly helped with the interpretation of the latter data. Jonathan Chivers has continued creating a database of the bound volumes, which will be integrated with the database of box contents.

This year has been so busy that there has again been virtually no time to work on converting the Summary Catalogue to a format suitable to go online (Stage 3 of the cataloguing strategy).

12. Archives development and accessibility

Last year's Annual Report described the projects which had been launched in order to improve the general accessibility of and engagement with the Archives through the provision of digitised Archives

data online. We are indebted to volunteers Doug Robinson and Austin Little for all the time and effort they have invested in these projects. The online Archives databases will be made available through the Museum's website. Unfortunately a software problem brought about a delay in their launch, but Doug managed to find a new solution, and the databases will go live soon. The first release will comprise Sacrament Certificates (1689-1765), the 1860 Property Survey which accompanied the Sewerage Map of Wells, and the Wells Petty Sessions Papers for 1850-1874. These searchable databases will be freely accessible to a national and international audience.

Linked with their launch, Doug and the Archivist have been endeavouring to achieve the addition of a 'MyDonate' facility to the Museum's website. This would mean that users of the website could make an online donation to the project, to help us continue and extend it. It would mean we could greatly improve the search interface for users because we could afford commercial software rather than being limited to the more primitive free software to which we are currently restricted. (MyDonate is a not-for-profit, online fundraising service for UK charities operated by BT, and is free for charities.) Austin has already digitised the data from three nineteenth-century City Archives property registers (1821, 1835 and 1893) which we envisage would comprise the second release online.

A historical addition to the City Council website has been prepared by a volunteer, who typed in a list of past Mayors of Wells to add to those already listed on the website.

13. Volunteers

Over the year, an impressive 25 people have been volunteering in the Archives, mostly on a regular basis, but some on a project basis. They have been vital to much of what has been achieved. The Archivist (who manages them) greatly appreciates their time and commitment. Many thanks to Clare Blackmore, Lorna and Mike Brooks, Jonathan Chivers, Rachel Clarke, Catherine Cooper, Sue Curragh, Brian Curran, Holly Dowse, Juliet Faith, Marja Haas, Andrew Haymes, John Hazell, Philip Hoare, Janet James, Hilary Kitcher, Austin Little, Jean Mann, Becky and David Mather, Wendy Osterman, Doug Robinson, Steve Tofts, Sarah Villiers and Norman Woollard. Much gratitude also to those who are working on the "Firefighting" exhibition: Paul Pickford, Janet Rodger, Tony Lee, Jonathan Chivers, Clare Blackmore and Andrew Fawcett. Another 17 volunteers (including City councillors) kindly helped at Archives events at the Town Hall.

Three volunteers deserve particular mention. Jonathan Chivers has provided indispensable all-round assistance as Archives Assistant for half a day every week. Austin Little has continued to create invaluable databases of individual collections, and Doug Robinson has patiently navigated the complicated route to making many of these available online.

14. Relationships with external bodies

The Archivist has continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Curators' and Archivists' Group, and the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group. There has also been the collaborative work on exhibitions noted above.

15. Training and conferences

Dr Wood attended a National Archives course in Bristol entitled "Meet the Funders: West".

16. Future targets

Tremendous progress has been made this year, with the focus once again on promoting the Archives and developing access. Now there is a pressing need to extend the range of methods by which people can access and engage with the collection. So the major target for 2017-18 is to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online. The Archives will continue to welcome readers and written enquiries, and attention will also continue to be given to basic archival procedures such as preservation and listing, as well as to digital projects. In terms of what is feasible, it must be remembered that the Archivist is employed for only two days a week.