

# WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

## ANNUAL REPORT, 2012-2013

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 17 May 2013

This has been the second year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum. It has been another busy and eventful year, during which the major achievements have been the opening of the City Archives Reading Room and the launch of a permanent display area within the Museum for exhibitions based around the City Archives collection. Once again, the Archivist wishes to acknowledge the valuable support and encouragement received from the Honorary Curator of the Museum.

### 1. Opening of Wells City Archives to readers

During the move of the Archives from the Town Hall to the Museum, the Archives was temporarily closed to the public. Once the move had been completed, a limited service began. As was reported to the Board in a report dated 15/11/2012, between January and October 2012, there were 52 research enquiries and 15 visits by readers. Moreover, the Archivist led three tours of the City Archives.

The next stage was to offer the public an extended and more professional service. During 2012, the Archivist concentrated on the preparations necessary for this. These included the development of resources such as improved catalogues and new information leaflets about using the collection, the establishment of formal admission and readers' registration procedures, and the trialling of the procedures and the documentation she had drawn up. In addition, it was necessary to make arrangements for security and reprographics (taking into account copyright issues). The Archivist also reorganised the Research Room so it could function as the Reading Room (for instance, installing card indexes for the Archives), equipped it with the necessary readers' equipment (such as book supports, document weights, cotton gloves and magnifying glasses), and provided appropriate signage. She is grateful to the Curator for supplying lockers and coat hooks, along with a second-hand printer/copier.



*The Reading Room*

*Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum*

On 26th March 2013, the City Archives Reading Room opened. The regular readers' slot is on a Tuesday morning, with visits by prior appointment only. Readers have attended every Tuesday since the facility was launched.

### 2. Launch of a permanent display area within the Museum for exhibitions based around the Wells City Archives collection

The Archivist requested display facilities in the 'Wells Room' which is being developed at the Museum, so that she could organise for a changing display of documents from the City Archives to be on public view, along with permanent information about the City Archives. The Curator kindly allocated two desk cases and a set of display boards for the exclusive use of material from and about the City Archives. The Archivist arranged a visit by the Conservation Development Officer for the South Western Federation of Museums in order that lighting levels in the room could be assessed, a necessity before original documents could be put on display. Subsequent to the Conservation Officer's report, appropriate light filters were installed. Suitable security for the cases has also been installed.

Since 26th March 2013, documents from Wells City Archives have been on display to all visitors to the Museum. The first temporary display was researched and put together by a volunteer, Bob Love, and is on the early history of Wells Police (which has been completely overlooked until now). Original documents from the City Archives are complemented by artefacts from Wells and Bridgwater Museums.

Most of the material which will be showcased in the temporary exhibitions will be on public view for the first time. The aim is to demonstrate the range of documents which are held in the Archives; documents which in most cases have never been properly studied and allowed to take their place in the rich story of the City.

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

The task of organising the City Archives in their new home has continued. All the archival boxes have been given a second label which indicates their location; this helps with the return of items to the correct location. A list identifying what was shelved where was drawn up by volunteers. The Archivist has now added this to the computer catalogue, thereby aiding considerably the retrieval of boxes.

### 4. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

The Archivist recently organised a review of the Security Policy for the Strong Room at the Museum. Several adjustments were discussed with the Museum's Curator and Manager, and agreement was reached on new security measures to be implemented. These include installing a key box for spare keys and training the caretakers in what should be rescued and how in case of an emergency.

### 5. Conservation and preservation issues

The Archivist has taken advice from the Head of Conservation at Somerset Heritage Centre. Following this, the location of the charters and medieval documents in the Strong Room has been altered. Moreover, the condition of one of the charters is being monitored in the way he advised when he inspected it. (The problem with its condition was evident before the charter was moved to the Museum.)

In order to maintain a stable environment for storage of the Archives, it is vital to monitor accurately the temperature and humidity in the Strong Room. The Archivist has invested in a Tinytag data logger, which is an up-to-date electronic device for monitoring these environmental conditions.

### 6. Archives Management Policy

The Archivist has reviewed the Archives Management Policy.

### 7. Cataloguing

Stage 1 of producing the digital summary catalogue of Wells City Archives has been completed, which means that for the first time there is an electronic catalogue of the Archives. Its most obvious benefit is that it is now possible to carry out electronic searches. The Archivist gratefully acknowledges the invaluable assistance of volunteer John Hazell in typing in the basis of this catalogue. All boxes whose contents have so far been listed are included in the catalogue. The Archivist has also listed the maps collection and added it to the catalogue.

Stage 2 comprises adding summary details of the contents of the boxes which have not yet been listed. This stage is ongoing, and the help of volunteers is vital. Bob Love's assistance has been invaluable. Stage 3 will be delivering internet access to the catalogue, with the help of Somerset Heritage Centre.

### 8. Digitisation

One of the volunteers (Steve Tofts) regularly photographs items from the City Archives. These images are for use in exhibitions and by researchers, and are being added to the collection of digital assets.

### 9. Museum volunteers

Museum volunteers continue to be a great asset to the City Archives at the Museum. In addition to the assistance already mentioned, they have helped research documents from the Archives for exhibitions. Members of the Archives Special Interest Group (SIG) will be helping to invigilate in the Reading Room and list box contents.

### 10. Exhibitions

The Archivist researched and provided material from the Archives for use in several exhibitions at the Museum: "Wartime in Wells and Mendip", the major exhibition "We Be Turrible Proud of 'Ee – Sport in

Wells", and the current exhibition on the history of Wells City Police Force. She took a significant role in helping organise the sport exhibition and mentor the volunteer who coordinated that exhibition.

#### 11. Heritage Open Days

The Archivist continues to be a member of the working group which coordinates this event in Wells and is helping with an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for project funding for developing a walking trail of Wells on future Heritage Open Days. During the 2012 Heritage Open Days, she led tours of the Strong Room at the Museum. At Wells Town Hall, she set up displays of material from the City Archives, along with items from the Museum collection. The displays included the history of the Town Hall; inns and pubs of Wells; and Wells in Bloom. The latter featured the old Woolworth's delivery bicycle which belongs to the Museum's collection, with its basket filled with flowers. It was included because the founder of Wells in Bloom was the then Manager of the local branch of Woolworths.

#### 12. Development of relationships with external bodies

The Friends of Somerset Archives visited in April 2012, and the Archivist gave them a talk on the City Archives and took them on a tour. During the year she has continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group (which has been hosted at the Museum), and the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group. The Curator invited the City Council's Archives Committee to hold one of their meetings at the Museum, which they did in October, followed by a tour of the Strong Room led by the Archivist to show Councillors the new accommodation for the City Archives

Following the transfer of leadership for the UK's archive sector to The National Archives, the latter appointed a dedicated Engagement Manager for each region of the country. Their role is to "get to know the archive services, understand regional priorities and identify opportunities". The Archivist has invited the Engagement Manager for the West to visit.

#### 13. Promotion of the City Archives

All the exhibitions including City Archives material have been publicised in the Wells Journal. However, there has intentionally not yet been a dedicated attempt at promoting and raising the profile of the Archives, as a phased approach is being followed, in order to ensure that it is possible to cope with demand. A decision was taken to make the opening of the Reading Room low key to begin with and monitor the response. We do not have the resources to cope with the possible consequences of a high profile launch. The opening was announced in the Museum's newsletter, on its website, and to City Councillors; and those making enquiries are also being informed. In the future a promotional strategy will be developed to engage with a wider public audience and stimulate the use of the City Archives – as long as it is felt that the resources are there to deal with this.

#### 14. Future targets

This year the first phase of establishing the City Archives at the Museum has continued (for instance, carrying on with organising and developing the Archives, particularly in areas such as cataloguing and listing). In addition, the major target of the second phase has been achieved: re-opening to the public.

The third phase entails the improvement of services to readers and those making enquiries. It has two main targets: (i) to continue developing the infrastructure for the Reading Room and (ii) to develop standard procedures for dealing with remote research enquiries (enquiries from the public). These represent the major targets for 2013-14. Areas in which further development of the Reading Room is necessary include establishing a scale of reproduction charges, preparing the rest of the documentation, and training a team of volunteers to help supervise the Reading Room.

Another future target is to perform an evaluation which will encompass understanding who the users and non-users of the Archives are, assessing users' needs, devising plans to broaden the range of users, and developing the audience. A promotional strategy for the City Archives will then be created, based on the results of the evaluation, and tempered by the necessity of having the resources to cope with an increase in public demand.