

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 2011-2012

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 3 April 2012

This has been an eventful and exciting year: the year in which the move of Wells City Archives to new storage at Wells & Mendip Museum was completed. During the first year of the Archives at the Museum, many new initiatives have been started, fruitful collaboration is underway, and the complementary and symbiotic relationship between the City Archives and Museum collections has been developed. The Archivist particularly wishes to acknowledge the constructive support and encouragement received from the Honorary Curator of the Museum.

1. The move

The bulk of Wells City Archives (as specified in Schedule A of the Loan Agreement) is now located at the Museum. The transfer of archival material took place in stages between March and November 2011. Three moves were carried out by Wicks & Son between March and June, during which 676 boxes and 680 bound volumes were transported, along with various artefacts.

The most ancient, precious and vulnerable items were not moved until later in the year, after new security arrangements for the Museum Strong Room had been put into place and appropriate shelving units had been constructed. These items comprised the 34 City charters, the Convocation (Act) Books (1378-1835), other ancient volumes, the collection of around 200 medieval title deeds and leases (mainly 14th and 15th centuries), the maps, the prints, the posters and the large photographs. They were transported by the Archivist with the invaluable help of Museum volunteers and the Town Hall Manager and Deputy Town Hall Manager in a further five trips. These were completed by the end of November, so that the most valuable material did not spend another winter in the damp conditions of the old jail cells at the Town Hall.

The move entailed a considerable amount of organisation, sorting, listing, labelling, packing and unpacking, but went very smoothly.

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

Most of the records (including all the oldest ones) are stored on a dedicated section of the mobile shelving within the Strong Room. This section of the shelving is secured by its own lock. A bay of Dexian shelving has been constructed elsewhere in the Strong Room and the large maps, prints and posters are stored here.

The archival boxes have been relabelled as the old labels had faded to the point of illegibility. The task of organising the City Archives in their new home continues. The Archivist will shortly be instituting a new organisational plan for the location of the boxes; this more logical approach will ensure ease of access. Moreover, many of the volumes still need to be ordered appropriately.

3. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

Initially the Strong Room at the Museum did not meet the British Standard 5454 (2000) requirements for archival storage in terms of security, so the Archivist drew up a Security Policy. This was discussed and agreed with the Museum's Curator, and the new security measures were then implemented. These measures included the installation of new door locks (including a BS 3261 5-lever security lock), a lock for the mobile shelving, and the finalisation and implementation of the Security Policy, which restricts access both to the keys and to the Strong Room itself.

4. Conservation and preservation issues

The environmental conditions of the Museum's Strong Room are far superior to those of the jail cells at the Town Hall. Hence its new location is a great improvement for the City Archives. However, the Archivist is concerned about the condition of one of the charters and is taking steps to see what can be done about this. (This problem was evident before the charter was moved to the Museum.)

5. Archives Management Policy

The Archivist has written an Archives Management Policy. This will be reviewed annually.

6. Cataloguing

Several cataloguing projects have been initiated. One involves a summary listing of the contents of unlisted boxes in order that a complete catalogue of the City Archives can be created for the first time. A second project comprises the specification and implementation of a new Archives database, with the aim of delivering internet access to the catalogue. Somerset Heritage Centre has provided valuable advice to the Archivist in this respect and will ultimately put the catalogue online. Two volunteers are providing great assistance with data entry. A third volunteer is listing the photographs contained in the collection and ensuring that they are appropriately stored in Melinex pockets. Fourthly, an Archives Special Interest Group (SIG) has been set up amongst the Museum volunteers. It is led by the present Archivist and Jean Imray (former City Archivist). After appropriate training, and once the physical reorganisation of the Archives has been completed, the members of the SIG will start listing box contents. This will allow more detail to be added to the catalogue concerning the contents of those boxes so far listed only summarily.

7. Digitisation

The Archivist has initiated a project for developing digital assets; for instance, having photographs taken of the City charters and digital copies made of key photographs from the City's collection. The Museum has recently raised funds for the purchase of photographic and digital copying equipment and a number of volunteers have received two days' training in its use.

8. Administration

The Museum has provided an office for the exclusive use of the Archivist, together with telephone and internet services.

9. Museum volunteers

Museum volunteers are a great asset to the City Archives at the Museum. They have provided and continue to supply sterling and much appreciated assistance in various areas. In addition to those already mentioned, they have also helped install and rearrange numerous boxes on shelves; construct shelving systems; and carry out research for exhibitions. It is envisaged that another role for the SIG may be to research documents from the City Archives for future displays.

10. Enquiries and visitors

To enable the move and subsequent establishment of the Archives at the Museum to take place, it was necessary to close the City Archives temporarily. During this period, it was explained that regrettably we were at present unable to answer any enquiries relating to the Archives or receive any visitors, but that there would shortly be a phased reintroduction of service. A very limited service has recently begun.

11. Exhibitions

One of the great benefits of moving the City Archives to storage at the Museum is that it has made it much easier to reunite photographs and artefacts with documents and records which relate to them. Then the results can be used for exhibitions which bring the history of our city back to life.

Items from the City Archives have been included in several exhibitions at the Museum; for instance, the recent exhibition "Fresh Researches into Local History" included a display on the early history of Wells City Band (researched by the Archivist), and another (put together by a volunteer) on HMS Fleetwood and its link with the city (including the U-boat life jacket belonging to the Archives). The Archivist is also providing material from the Archives for use in the forthcoming exhibitions on the World Wars and on the history of the Wells Sports Clubs.

12. Heritage Open Day

Material from the City Archives, along with items from the Museum collection, was exhibited at Wells Town Hall as part of the 2011 Heritage Open Days event. Displays included the history of the Town Hall and railways in Wells.

13. Liaison with Museum Library

The Museum Library contains resources and its own archives which supplement and provide contextual information for many of the items in the City Archives. The Archivist and the Museum's Honorary Librarian have initiated a constructive exchange of catalogues and information.

14. Development of relationships with external bodies

The Archivist has met officers of Friends of Somerset Archives, for whom she will be running a tour of the City Archives shortly, and has run a research workshop for the Wells U3A's Local History Group. She is also a founder member of the Mid-Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group, and attends meetings of the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group.

15. Promotion of the City Archives

A press release and photograph of the move were provided to the Wells Journal, who ran them. The exhibitions have also been publicised. The new Museum leaflet will include a section on the City Archives and a page on the Archives will shortly be added to the Museum's website. However, there has intentionally not yet been a dedicated attempt at promoting and raising the profile of the Archives, as we are not yet in a position to re-open properly to the public.

16. Future targets

This year the first phase of establishing the City Archives at the Museum has commenced. Next year this phase needs to continue; for instance, completing the reorganisation of the Archives in their new home, and continuing to develop the Archives, particularly in areas such as cataloguing and listing. A major new target is to work towards the second phase: re-opening to the public. This entails developing resources to improve our services, such as improved catalogues and new information leaflets about using the collection. The detail of how material is to be made available to researchers at the Museum also needs to be worked out. A promotional strategy will then be developed to engage with a wider public audience and stimulate the use of the City Archives. This is a fascinating collection which deserves to be better known.

Archives move from jail cells to museum

The first stage of moving Wells City Archives to a modern storage facility took place this week.

A total of 368 boxes were moved from their current location in the Victorian jail cells beneath the town hall to the large up-to-date store at Wells and Mendip Museum.

The rest of the move will be carried out in several more stages.

The archives will be on long-term loan to the museum and the city council will continue to fund their care.

Barry Lane, curator of the museum, said: "We are delighted to receive the first delivery of boxes containing the city's archival records and are pleased to ensure that the archives stay in Wells.

"We look forward to opening them up for research later in the year."

To enable the move to take place, it has been necessary to close the archives to the public temporarily.

The latest information is available on the city council's website www.wells.gov.uk.



Andrew Ware and Richard Campbell of Wicks and Son delivering the first archival boxes to the museum

Wells Journal, 7 April 2011