

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2015 - 3 April 2016

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 12 May 2016

Summary

This has been the fifth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum, and great strides have been made both in improving access to the Archives and in developing the Archives in ways which will make it still more accessible. Thanks are owed to Wells City Council for providing additional funding from April 2015 in order to extend the Archivist's hours by half a day per week, bringing her time up to two days a week. This has made a considerable difference to what she can achieve. Once again, the Archivist wishes to acknowledge the invaluable support and encouragement she has received from the Honorary Curator of the Museum.

It has been another extremely successful year for the Archives. The major achievements since April 2015 have been:

- Extending the opening hours of the City Archives Reading Room and receiving an increased number of readers during the third year of the Reading Room;
- Improving response time to written enquiries;
- Increasing Archives development work, particularly through the expansion of a listing programme, and thanks to an increased number of volunteers;
- Completing the remounting of the City Charters and continuing a rolling conservation programme;
- A hugely successful major exhibition.

The focus on developing access means that there has been little time to work on the Summary Catalogue. The major target for 2016-17 is therefore 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 and to advance Archives development work).

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been open for three years. Since April 2015, the regular readers' slot on a Tuesday morning has been supplemented by an additional slot on a Wednesday morning (with visits by prior appointment only). The demand for public access (in terms both of reader visits and written enquiries) has once again increased and there have been a record number of reader visits and enquiries during the last year.
- Between 4 April 2015 and 3 April 2016, there were 75 reader visits and 104 enquiries were received. The Archivist also led nine tours of the City Archives, including one for the City Council's Archives Committee and one for the artist who is creating 'Wells in Mosaic'.
- 69% 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 ranging from the Wells Bread Riot to the Somerset Assizes. Examples of the types of written enquiry received are: (a) local history (including that of the City Council), e.g. schools, music festivals and Friendly Societies; (b) family history; (c) house or building history, including properties such as the Bishop's Barn; (d) mapping enquiries; (e) photographic enquiries, for instance, a request for images of VE Day in Wells. There have been three research enquiries requesting information for BBC TV programmes.
- Of the reader visits, 55% concerned local history, 12% family history, and 23% house or building history; the remaining 10% were specialist in nature. Of the written enquiries, 51% concerned local



The volunteer Archives Box Listing Group, April 2016

history, 27% family history, and 16% house or building history; the other 6% were specialist in nature.

- 76% of reader visits were by members of the general public, 19% by academics or students (including undergraduates from Strode College and a pupil from The Blue School), and 4% by non-academics intending to publish. As for written enquiries, 76% were from members of the general public, 11% from academics or students (including professors, postgraduates and undergraduates), 6% from BBC TV and local press, and 6% from non-academics intending to publish.
- The majority of readers came from Wells and the Mendip area, but there were visitors from Cardiff, Eastbourne and Bristol. Virtually all the written enquiries came from Britain, but there were also emails from Italy, the USA, Canada and Australia.
- There has been an improvement in response time to research enquiries thanks to volunteer Jonathan Chivers. However, there still remains a backlog (albeit much smaller than in the past).

2. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The Archivist has continued to maintain a high public profile for the Archives. She is very grateful to the journalist Clare Blackmore for the productive collaboration with her. The Archivist has also carried out outreach work such as talks, events, and exhibitions.

3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

The Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on 12 September 2015. It was again a great success, attracting 350 visitors. Dr Wood had prepared exhibitions from the City Archives, and there were also displays by Mendip Postcard Club, Wells Railway Fraternity, and Janet and Peter James. Dr Wood had organised too the first showings of a specially-created film of local interest (by Tony Moon), and Clare Blackmore gave a talk on the "Baker Bard of Wells". Visitors were able to 'walk along Queen Street and Broad Street in the year 2000' (using panoramic photographs loaned by Wells Civic Society). For children, the Archivist had created a 'Children's Quiz and Trail round the Town Hall'.

4. "Know Your Place – West of England"

This project received Heritage Lottery funding. The Archivist arranged for the unique 1860 Sewerage Map of Wells to be digitised as part of the project, and this was done in December. The City Archives will be supplied with a digital copy of this.

5. Somerset and Dorset Railway (S&D) – 50th Anniversary of Closure

The Archivist wanted to offer an Archives outreach activity to children, so organised a Family Activity Day at the Town Hall on 27 February 2016. She booked three sets of activities from the Heritage Lottery funded S&D commemoration project, and also prepared her own exhibition about the S&D. Wells Railway Fraternity brought along another display, and four pop-up roller display banners were loaned by the Lottery project. The event was a great success.

6. Exhibitions

A major exhibition entitled "Firefighting in Wells" ran at the Museum from 8 August to 5 September 2015. It involved the local community and proved tremendously successful. The exhibition was a collaboration between the City Archives, volunteer Paul Pickford and the Museum, and the Archivist made a leading contribution to it. It would not have happened without the sterling team of volunteers. A huge number of local people kindly loaned photos or memorabilia and helped with the research, as did Wells Fire Station, Banwell Fire Museum, and the Historical Society of Wells, Maine. Several local businesses and the City Council generously made donations towards the costs or supported the exhibition in other ways. A special Firefighting supplement was produced by Clare Blackmore and the Wells Journal. A preview was held; a vintage Wells fire engine came to mark the opening day; and there were also a caption competition, a Children's Quiz, and a ground-floor digital screen for the disabled. The exhibition was so popular that it will be revived in 2017.

During the year, volunteer Adam Humphreys worked with the Archivist on creating a new display for the City Archives case in the 'Wells Room' at the Museum. It was to be on seals, including the City seals. Unfortunately Adam moved abroad before completing the display, but it is hoped that it may take place at some point in the future.

At the Town Hall, the Archivist created several exhibitions using material from the Archives. These included a display of original documents after the Mayor Making ceremony. She also initiated a new display in the vestibule entitled "Archivist's Choice", which is changed regularly and is designed to highlight interesting documents and photographs from the Archives.

7. Talks on the City Archives

During 2015-16, the Archivist gave a talk to the National Women's Register.

8. Collection management

A stocktake was carried out in December 2015, and will be repeated at three-yearly intervals.

9. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

Security measures are being kept under review.

10. Conservation and preservation issues

The remounting of all the City Charters has been completed by the County Conservator. A rolling conservation programme is continuing. The items presently undergoing conservation treatment include the seal of a Queen Elizabeth I charter (1586), which is being restored in order to incorporate two fragments recently identified by Adam Humphreys.

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

Work has been done on updating the contents of the Summary Catalogue, but overall there has been little time to work on converting it to a format suitable to go online (Stage 3 of the cataloguing strategy). Moreover, the required specification has been changed externally during the year, which will require more input.

The monthly box-listing sessions have continued during 2015-16, now with a group of ten volunteers. They are extremely productive and of great help in addressing listing backlogs. They have recently been focussing on a very rare collection of previously uncatalogued nineteenth-century Petty Sessions papers for Wells. They record a summary listing, and volunteer Austin Little enters the details in an Excel database. The target is to complete a record of a 25-year period, from 1850-1874.

Volunteer Jonathan Chivers has been creating a database of the bound volumes (which is well advanced) and one of the plans.

12. Archives development and accessibility

Archives development work is being carried out which is designed to improve access to and engagement with the collection. In order to make the Archives more accessible, not only is it important to welcome readers and written enquiries, and exhibit archival material, but also to unlock the contents of the archives and make them available. This can be achieved by cataloguing, listing, digitising the results and getting them online. This can then improve the experience of readers and enquirers, but in particular, it can improve general accessibility and the Archives can be enjoyed by a wider audience.

With this end in mind, three projects have been underway this year. One is the Petty Sessions listing project. It is hoped to make the database covering the years 1850-1874 available on the Internet. This will be an extremely unusual source to find available online and will be valuable for family historians. Apart from census returns and BMD certificates, it is difficult to find references to our working class ancestors. Criminal court cases are one possible area of investigation. Our ancestors were not necessarily criminals; they may have been victims or witnesses. Other planned outcomes from the Petty Sessions project include a display for Heritage Open Day 2016 (hopefully followed by a display in the Museum's Meeting Room) and publication of our findings (and hopefully inclusion in future publications by Norman Woollard and Bob Love, our expert advisers).

The second project is to create new databases which would be useful to family, house and local historians. Austin Little has transcribed and digitised data from two nineteenth-century City Archives sources of property information (1860 and 1893), and is well on the way with a third (1821). We hope that it may be possible to make these Excel databases available online.

The third project is a Wells Ancestors database, which Austin designed at the Archivist's request. This composite database is a work in progress. It is a searchable city-wide index of individuals which lists the occurrences of people's names in the various discrete databases which Austin has been compiling. It is designed to assist family history researchers by guiding them to any database in which their ancestor's name occurs, and thence to the original archival record. So far the database covers the years 1689-1893, and incorporates the names from the following databases: Sacrament Certificates, 1860 Survey Accompanying the Sewerage Map of Wells, 1893 Property Register for the In Parish of St Cuthbert's, and Petty Sessions.

13. Volunteers

The number of Archives volunteers at the Museum has continued to grow, and an impressive 21 volunteers have contributed over the year. Most have helped on a regular basis, but some on a project basis. They are crucial to many aspects of the work of the Archives, and much less would be possible without them. The Archivist greatly appreciates the time, expertise and commitment they give. Many thanks to Clare Blackmore, Lorna and Mike Brooks, Jonathan Chivers, Sue Curragh, Andrew Haymes, John Hazell, Adam Humphreys, Janet James, Hilary Kitcher, Austin Little, Becky and David Mather, Wendy Osterman, Steve Tofts, Sarah Villiers and Norman Woollard. Much gratitude also to those who worked on the "Firefighting in Wells" exhibition: Paul Pickford, Janet Rodger, Tony Lee, Jonathan Chivers, Clare Blackmore and Andrew Fawcett. Another 14 volunteers (including City councillors) kindly helped at Archives events at the Town Hall.

Two volunteers deserve special mention. One morning a week throughout 2015-16, the Archivist has been benefitted from the unfailing help of volunteer Archives Assistant Jonathan Chivers, who gives wonderful all-round assistance. Austin Little, database volunteer extraordinaire, has made frequent visits to the Archives and created invaluable databases of individual collections.

The Archivist has managed the volunteers and the projects on which they are working, and given appropriate training. Feedback suggests that participation in Archives projects and outreach events has been enjoyable. It is hoped that it has increased the volunteers' engagement with the Archives and with their local history too. Dr Wood has also given training given to volunteers belonging to the Museum Library in listing and caring for the Library's archives.

14. Development of 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. She has also invited the new National Archives Engagement Manager for the West to visit the City Archives.

15. Training and conferences

Dr Wood attended an MSCAG training session on copyright, a SW Museum Skills course on 'Packing and Handling' and an ARA workshop on 'Practical Digital Preservation'.

16. Future targets

Huge progress has been made during this year, with the focus on developing access. The Archives now needs to extend the variety of methods by which people can access and engage with the collection. The major target for 2016-17 is therefore to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online, thereby making the Archives more accessible. Alongside this, the Archives will continue to welcome readers and written enquiries, with a specific aim of improving further the response time to the latter. It is hoped to advance Archives development work too. Attention must also continue to be given to basic archival procedures such as preservation and listing, as well as to promoting the Archives. In all of this, it has to be ensured that plans are of an appropriate scale, given that the Archivist is employed for only two days a week.