

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2017 - 3 April 2018

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 8 August 2018

Summary

This has been the seventh year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum, and the Archives is flourishing. Promoting the collection and improving its accessibility have been important focuses, with major exhibitions and digitisation projects, including the start of an exciting and significant new database: 'ScraseBase'. As ever, the Archivist acknowledges her deep gratitude to the willing band of Archives volunteers, and to the Curator, who has offered outstanding support and assistance. The memory of Barry Lane remains an inspiration. Dr Wood also wishes to pay tribute to the late Councillor Chris Briton, former Chair of the City Council's Archives Committee and Museum Trustee, and a great supporter of the Archives.

The major achievements in the City Archives since April 2017 have been:

- Improving access with a new-style Reading Room and receiving a large number of readers;
- Preparing, presenting and collaborating on several major exhibitions, and engaging with wider audiences through outreach events;
- Progressing the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online, thereby making the Archives more accessible; and
- Continuing to develop the unique digital Archives resources, including initiating 'ScraseBase'.

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics



Wells City Archives

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been open for five years.
- Between 4 April 2017 and 3 April 2018, there were 127 reader visits and 61 enquiries were received. The Archivist also led 5 tours of the City Archives.
- 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 including Wells Rifle Volunteers, Llewellyn's Almshouse, and the seventeenth-century Virginia Company lottery. Examples of the types of written enquiry received are: (a) local history (including Wells High School, Wells photographers, and duck decoy pools in the city); (b) family history; (c) house or building history (including the former Sanitary Hospital); (d) mapping enquiries (such as railway routes); (e) photographic enquiries.
- Of the reader visits, 74% concerned local history, 6% family history, and 23% house or building history; the remaining 3% were specialist in nature. Of the written enquiries, 41% concerned local history (for instance, the Archivist checked and edited the text for some of the Civic Society's new plaques), 21% family history, and 20% house or building history; the other 18% were specialist in nature.
- 73% of reader visits were by members of the general public, 12% by academics or students, 13% by non-academics intending to publish, and 2% by archivists and heritage professionals. As for written enquiries, 82% were from members of the general public, 8% from academics or students, 8% from non-academics intending to publish, 1% from local press, and 1% from archivists and heritage professionals.
- The majority of readers came from Wells and the Mendip area, but there were visitors from Devon, Banbury and Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Nearly all the written enquiries came from Britain, but there were also emails from Australia, Canada, the USA and Holland.

2. New-style Archives Reading Room

Since February, we have been running a monthly Archives Reading Room session in the Lecture Hall. This enables us to accommodate up to four readers at a time, compared with only one reader in the Research Room. It has proved a huge success.

3. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The Archivist has continued to ensure a high public profile for the Archives. She is particularly grateful to Clare Blackmore for her generous collaboration on pieces for the *Wells Journal* and *Wells Voice*. Dr Wood has also carried out a range of outreach work, which is detailed below.

3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

As usual, the Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on 9 September 2017. She and Archives volunteers prepared a brand-new local history exhibition on the prisons of Wells, entitled “Cage, Cowhouse and Clink: The Prisons of Wells from Medieval Times to the Present Day”. This was a great draw. Along with various other displays presenting material from the City Archives and further displays of local interest which were mounted by other groups and individuals, overall the event attracted a record-breaking total of 585 visitors.

4. Exhibitions

This has been another year of exhibitions. “Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells” ran at Wells Museum from 6 to 26 April 2017 and received much positive feedback. It was based on data brought to light by volunteers at the monthly Archives Box-Listing Sessions run by the Archivist at the Museum.



A major exhibition entitled “Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells” ran at the Bishop’s Palace from 6 May to 30 September 2017. It was a collaboration between the City Archives, the Museum and the Bishop’s Palace. It gave the opportunity to showcase some of the Archives’ great treasures: three of the most significant charters were on public display for five months. They were the

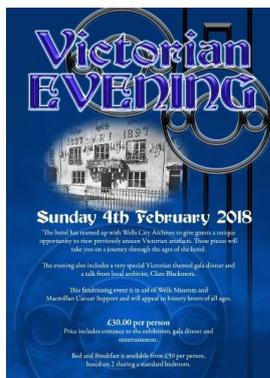
King John Charter (1201), the Bekynton ‘Water Charter’ (1451) and the Queen Elizabeth I Charter of Incorporation (1589).

The exhibition took two significant historical maps of Wells, the 1735 Simes map and the City Archives’ 1860 Sewerage Plan, as snapshots in time to help us to explore and compare what life was like in this city in the 18th and 19th centuries. The collaboration was a very positive experience, and the exhibition was a runaway success. It had an incredible 45,930 visitors. Comments in the Visitors’ Book included: “A wonderful and informative exhibition, well laid out and easy to follow. Obviously well researched. The charters are a big bonus”.

In response to popular demand, the “Firefighting in Wells” exhibition of 2015 was followed up by a “Firefighting in Wells & the Mendips” exhibition, which ran at the Museum from 5 August to 13 September 2017. It was 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 predecessor, it also involved the local community. This major exhibition included a mass of artefacts and evocative photographs. Reproductions of City Archives documents were again featured. There were also a caption competition, a children’s quiz, and a hand-drawn calendar.

At Wells Town Hall, the Archivist created several exhibitions using material from the Archives. These included one entitled “Faces From the Past”, which featured recently discovered photos of early Victorian Mayors. She also prepared a display of original documents for the reception immediately after the Mayor Making ceremony on 20 May 2017.

5. Talks, tours and other outreach events



During 2017-18, the Archivist gave talks on the collection to Pilton History Group and Shepton Mallet Local History Group. The five tours of the Archives which she conducted included one for Strode College degree students. In November 2017, visitors came from Bad Dürkheim on a twinning visit, and the Archivist created for them a leaflet about the Wells City Charters.

Dr Wood has also taken part in other outreach events which have showcased the City Archives collection and engaged with wider audiences. One of these was a memorable Victorian Evening. Finds unearthed by volunteer Andrew Haymes during a Box-Listing session gave rise to the idea of a charity Victorian dinner. Andrew had come across beautiful Victorian menus of lavish banquets held at the Swan Hotel for Victorian Mayormakings. The fundraising dinner was held at the Swan on 4 February 2018, and recreated some of the dishes from the Victorian banquets. Reproductions of the historic menus were on display, along with other reproduction

documents from the City Archives. Entertainment was also provided. The Archivist helped plan this enjoyable event, which was sold out. Many of the 86 people who attended wore Victorian dress. The event was in aid of Wells Museum and Macmillan Cancer Support.

On 27 September 2017, the Archivist hosted a meeting of the Mid Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group at the Museum. It included a tour of the City Archives. Then on 31 October, she assisted the Museum's volunteer Learning Officer, Donnie Houser, in hosting a GEM training session on "Effective Engagement". It was part of the GEM Heritage Learning Foundation Programme.

The Archivist carried out research on behalf of the YMCA in Wells, who were commemorating their 125th anniversary. She provided them with images for use in publicity and in the display which accompanied their special service in Wells Cathedral on 21 October 2017.

On 19 February 2018, a very successful Wells Traders' Evening was held at the Museum. Dr Wood gave a presentation about the Archives collection. She highlighted the documents it contains which local traders could use in promoting their businesses or decorating their premises.

6. "Search & Learn: the Story of Wells"

The Archivist has had a significant role in the development of the project for establishing the new City of Wells galleries at the Museum, which will tell the story of the ordinary people of Wells. Specifically, she has put a lot of work into the preparation of a funding bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which was submitted in February 2018. For example, she proposed and researched historical figures through whose viewpoints the story of Wells could be told. The development of a community history resource is also part of the plan, and again, the City Archives would play a key part in this.

7. Loans, deposits and donations



A significant loan was that of the three pivotal charters to the Bishop's Palace for the joint exhibition, for which Dr Wood created a special Loan Agreement. Three of the welcome donations made to the City Archives this year were from Jeffrey Allen (documents of local interest), Megan Hurrell and James Arlett (both Strode College undergraduates on the "History, Heritage and Archaeology" degree course, who deposited their projects on aspects of Mendip Hospital and its C19th-century pauper lunatic inmates). On a practical note, we are very grateful for the laptop donated to the Archives by Just Ales when they replaced it.

8. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

Security measures are being kept under review. In July 2017, Coomber replaced the security alarm for the Strong Room with an up-to-date model.

9. Conservation and preservation issues

Jonathan Chivers, Archives Assistant, has continued to monitor regularly the environmental conditions in the Strong Room, and the necessary action has been taken to achieve appropriate conditions. Very careful environmental monitoring was carried out at the Bishop's Palace during the joint exhibition, and advice was taken in advance from Mervyn Richens, Senior Conservator at Somerset Heritage Centre, and Helena Jaeschke, Conservation Development Officer for South West Museums.

10. Cataloguing and listing

This year has been so busy that it was impeding progress on the Archives Catalogue. The ten hard-working volunteers who make up the Archives Box-Listing Group continued the monthly contents listing sessions throughout 2017. However, in January 2018 the Archivist put the Group on temporary standby, to give her and Jonathan Chivers more time to focus on high-level cataloguing. Jonathan has made great strides with the listing of bound volumes, plans and posters, whilst Dr Wood has begun converting the Summary Catalogue to a format suitable to go online.

11. Archives development and accessibility

The digitisation projects have continued. Archives volunteers have carried on with data entry, and yet more years have been added to the Petty Sessions database. A ground-breaking new digitisation project has commenced. The new database is named 'ScraseBase' after Tony Scrase, the eminent

Wells historian. It will contain a vast amount of data about properties in Wells, researched by Tony over decades. He carried out much of his research in the City Archives. When Tony lent the information to us, it was stored on index cards which fill three shoeboxes. Once the data has been digitised, ScraseBase will be released online for free consultation by members of the public. We are immensely grateful to Tony for his generosity in sharing the fruits of his research in this way.

Unfortunately there has been a delay in the launch of the online Archives databases. It is now hoped that the first release will be in summer 2018. It 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. We are indebted to volunteers Doug Robinson and Austin Little for all their hard work on these projects.

Given the number of digitisation projects which the Archives is carrying out, and the fact that the Archives Catalogue will go online once it is ready, a dedicated website for Wells City Archives is considered highly desirable. The Archives already has an online presence through both the Museum and City Council websites, which we greatly appreciate, but the volume of data we wish to upload is amongst several factors which mean that it would be preferable for the Archives to have its own website. In January 2018, volunteer Doug Robinson created a dummy website using WIX. The matter then went to the City Council's Archives Committee for discussion.

During the year, the Museum's volunteer Learning Officer, Donnie Houser, has been developing a new Learning Programme for the Museum, and the Archivist has been providing input. It is hoped that City Archives documents will form part of the offer for older pupils.

12. Volunteers

During 2017-18, a remarkable 20 people have been volunteering in the Archives, some on a regular basis, others on a project basis. Their contribution has been essential to the successes of this year. The Archivist (who manages them) hugely values their time and commitment.

Many thanks to Clare Blackmore, Mike Brooks, Jonathan Chivers, Catherine Cooper, Sue Curragh, Holly Dowse, Juliet Faith, Andrew Haymes, John Hazell, Philip Hoare, Hilary Kitcher, Austin Little, Becky and David Mather, Wendy Osterman, Doug Robinson, Steve Tofts, Sarah Villiers and Norman Woollard. Much gratitude also to those who worked on the "Firefighting" exhibition: Paul Pickford, Janet Rodger, Tony Lee, Jonathan Chivers, Clare Blackmore and Andrew Fawcett. Another 18 volunteers (including City councillors) kindly helped at Archives events at the Town Hall.

We warmly remember the late Lorna Brooks, who freely gave her time and shared her compendious local knowledge.

Once again, three volunteers deserve particular mention. Jonathan Chivers has unfailingly gone on providing vital all-round help as Archives Assistant for half a day every week. Austin Little has patiently continued to create invaluable databases of various collections, and Doug Robinson has dealt with many tortuous problems which have arisen in the process of preparing to make these available online.

13. Relationships with external bodies

Dr Wood has continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group (which she now chairs) and the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group.

14. Training and conferences

Dr Wood attended a "Know Your Place: West of England Collections Workshop" in Bath, and (along with Jonathan) a workshop in Taunton entitled "Documentation and Digitisation of Collections" and a National Archives event in Bath ("Archives Unlocked").

15. Future targets

The Archivist's major target for 2018-19 is to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online. It is also hoped that a dedicated City Archives website will get the go-ahead this year. Dr Wood will continue to welcome Archives readers and written enquiries, and to give attention to basic archival procedures such as preservation. In terms of what is feasible, it must be remembered that she is employed for only two days a week.