

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2018 - 3 April 2019

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 25 March 2020

Summary

This has been the eighth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum, and the Archives is flourishing. It has been another very busy and successful year. Once again the focus was on making the Archives more accessible, promoting them, and ensuring that conservation work continued. There has been significant outreach work, and development work has continued on a major digitisation project. The National Archives' Engagement Officer for the West, Tim Powell, visited in August 2018 and was particularly impressed by our outreach work (especially with local businesses and visitors to Wells) and digitisation projects. As always, the Archivist acknowledges her gratitude for the invaluable contribution made by Archives volunteers, particularly Jonathan Chivers (Archives Assistant), and for the substantial support and assistance offered by the Curator. Dr Wood also wishes to pay tribute to the late Councillor Danny Unwin, former Mayor of Wells, and a great friend of the Archives.

The major achievements in the City Archives in the year since April 2018 have been:

- Continuing improved access with the new-style Reading Room and receiving a large number of readers;
- Engaging with wider audiences and promoting the Archives by participating in several major collaborative outreach events and contributing to new local history publications;
- Continuing to progress 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 resource entitled *ScraseBase*, a significant database of Wells properties.

The Archivist was off work sick from 4 March 2019.

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics



Wells City Archives

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been open for six years.
- Between 4 April 2018 and 3 April 2019, there were 90 reader visits and 75 enquiries were received. The Archivist also led 2 tours of the City Archives.
- 82% of the requests for visits and enquiries came via the Museum, and the rest via the City Council.
- Of the reader visits, 55% concerned local history, 2% family history, 25% house or building history, 4% maps, 3% photographs, and the remaining 11% of visits were specialist in nature. Readers researched subjects including William Turner and mineral baths, the Cottage Hospital, the Civil War history of Wells, St Cuthbert's Church, Portway Lodge and The Rib. Specialist visits included 2 people being given professional advice on how to organise and manage the Bishop's Palace Archive.
- Of the written enquiries, 44% concerned local history (for instance, William Penn's speech and evacuees), 25% family history (including a Wells ancestor who was transported after the Bloody Assizes in 1685), and 12% house or building history (including properties in Priory Place). 3% were mapping enquiries (such as one concerning the tithe maps), 8% were photographic queries (including a request for help in dating photos of Wells owned by the enquirer), and the final 8% were specialist in nature. The latter included advising two undergraduates on careers in archives and conservation.
- The Archivist responded to many enquiries related to Armistice events, including providing information for St Cuthbert's School and for a special event at Wookey Church Hall.
- 76% of reader visits were by members of the general public, 2% by academics or students, 13% by non-academics intending to publish, and 9% by archivists and heritage professionals. One visitor was a novelist wanting background information on Elizabethan Wells. As for written enquiries, 78% were from members of the general public, 7% from academics or students, 3% from non-academics intending to publish, and 12% from archivists and heritage professionals.
- The majority of readers came from Wells and the Mendip area, but there were visitors from further afield in the West Country, Oxfordshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Australia. Nearly all the

written enquiries came from Britain, but there were also emails from Namibia, Australia and the Netherlands.

2. New-style Archives Reading Room

The improved access for readers made available in February 2018 (through a new monthly Reading Room session in the Lecture Hall) continued to prove extremely popular. Andrew Haymes provides excellent assistance to the readers we refer to the Museum Library from the Reading Room.

3. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The Archivist continued to ensure a high public profile for the Archives by submitting press releases to the local press and through a range of outreach work, which is described below.

4. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

As usual, the Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on 8 September 2018. In recognition of the centenary of the Universal Suffrage Act, the event incorporated the national HODs theme of 'Extraordinary Women'. There were displays by the Archivist on 'Women's Suffrage in Wells', 'Women's Firsts in Wells', and more. Moreover, she organised a performance of a suffrage playlet with a unique link to the city.



She collaborated with the newly-formed Wells Mills Interest Group (established by people she had brought together) to produce a brand new exhibition they had researched and written, called 'Mills of Wells'. This was very professional and was a huge draw. A lot of the content was researched in the City Archives, and like other displays on the day, it included images of Archives documents. Additional displays of local interest were mounted by further people, and overall the event attracted a record-breaking total of 821 visitors. It would not have been possible without the superb support of volunteers.

5. Exhibitions

In addition to collaborating on the 'Mills of Wells' exhibition, the Archivist created several displays at Wells Town Hall using material from the Archives. These included 'Archivist's Choice' displays such as 'Somerset Men in London' and 'Dancing on the Green', whilst Jonathan Chivers prepared a display about pyrotechnic celebrations in Wells at the end of World War One. The Archivist also mounted an exhibition in the Town Hall vestibule about King John and his 1201 charter for Wells.

6. Talks, tours and other outreach events

During 2018-19, the Archivist gave a talk on the Archives collection to the Evercreech Local History Society and one on women's suffrage in Wells to the Wells U3A History Group (which Richard Lovegrove helped present in a very lively manner). She conducted a tour of the Archives for Museum volunteers and another for City Councillors, was consulted for a collaborative First World War education project, and provided some work experience for a local schoolgirl. In May 2018, visitors came from Naumburg Cathedral on a visit, and the Archivist created for them a Powerpoint presentation and a large display of notable Wells City Charters at the Town Hall.

Dr Wood and Jonathan Chivers have also taken part in other outreach events which have utilised and showcased the City Archives collection and engaged with wider audiences. Firstly, the City Archives contributed to an exciting new community project, the *Southover History Project*. Julia and Jonathan created and ran two House History Workshops for them and provided copies of Archive documents and photographs for their memorable St Etheldreda's Day event on 23 June 2018. They advised on the project, carried out research for it, and liaised with Wells U3A's History Group.

Secondly, the Archivist contributed significantly to a special World War One commemorative project initiated by the Mayor of Wells (Cllr Celia Wride). Also taking part were the President of Wells Chamber of Commerce, the Museum's Curator, one of the Museum's Trustees and a Museum volunteer. The project was entitled *We Will Remember Them*. It focussed on the shops and businesses of Wells and

the men who worked in them and served during the war. The Archivist and Clare Blackmore carried out research into the men, and located period photographs of them and of the business premises. The Archivist also prepared all the text and images ready for the printer. Specially created posters were displayed in 29 Wells shop windows for the month of November 2018, with a trail leading people along



the route where the posters were displayed. The Mayor gave the Archivist a Mayor's Award in recognition of her work on this project.

A third outreach event in which the City Archives' participation promoted the Archives collection was the *Wake Up Wells!* community event on 26 January 2019. The City Archives had a stall in the Cathedral nave, staffed by the Archivist and Jonathan Chivers, who had created a special display for the occasion. A very positive response was achieved, with many interested visitors. Many Archives leaflets were given out and conversations held with numerous people who now plan to visit the Archives. Items from the City

Archives were loaned to the Wells Twinning Association for display at the event.

7. 'Search & Learn: the Story of Wells'

The Archivist continued to play a role in the development of this project at the Museum, which will establish new galleries telling the story of secular Wells, in which the City Archives will play a significant part. During this year work began on a second bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

8. Local history publications

In 2018, Wells Museum started a series of local history publications, and the Archivist helped with these in many ways, including responding to authors' enquiries and facilitating visits to the City Archives to consult source documents and photographs. One of the books in this series with which she assisted was published in November 2018: 'Lest we Forget ... The men on the Wells War Memorial who died in the Great War' by Sue Curragh and Pete Trueman. Images of documents and photographs held in the City Archives appeared in it. The Archivist helped too with the preparation of Eric Preston's book 'The Changing Shops of Wells, 1796–2018'.

Authors who were planning to use other publishers also carried out considerable research in the City Archives, where the Archivist guided them to unique source documents. Sue Caola researched her planned book on the history of Wells City Band, and Richard Green and Guy Belshaw researched theirs on the fairground family of Charles Heal.

9. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

Security measures are being kept under review.

10. Conservation and preservation issues

Jonathan Chivers has continued to monitor regularly the environmental conditions in the Strong Room, and the necessary action has been taken to achieve appropriate conditions.

11. Cataloguing and listing

This year has once again been so busy that it has limited progress on the Archives Catalogue. Jonathan continued listing bound volumes, new volunteer Peter Trueman listed maps, plans and posters, and Dr Wood worked on high-level cataloguing and on converting the Summary Catalogue to the requisite format for it to go online.

12. Archives development and accessibility

As regards the Archives' digitisation projects, intensive development work has continued on *ScraseBase*, the groundbreaking database of Wells property histories. It contains data (much of it from the City Archives) researched by historian Tony Scrase. *ScraseBase* will be released online for free consultation by members of the public. We are immensely grateful to Tony for his generosity in sharing his research in this way.

Unfortunately, although it was hoped to launch the first three of the online Archives databases in Summer 2018, this has been delayed (*see next point*).

13. Wells City Archives website project

It was explained in the last Annual Report that, given the number of digitisation projects with which the Archives is involved, and the fact that the Archives Catalogue will go online once it is ready, a dedicated website for Wells City Archives is considered extremely desirable. As was pointed out then, 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. They agreed to the City Council funding a dedicated searchable City Archives website, but this is now on hold pending review of the Council's overall website strategy and provision.

14. Volunteers

During 2018-19, the Archives continued to benefit from the willing services of numerous volunteers. Without their vast contribution, our achievements this year would not have been possible. The Archivist (who manages them) enormously values their time and commitment.

Jonathan Chivers has continued to provide essential all-round help as Archives Assistant for half a day every week, a much-valued contribution which he has been making since January 2015. Austin Little has gone on meticulously adding to the Petty Sessions database, and he and Clare Blackmore have patiently carried out sterling data entry for *ScraseBase*. Wendy Osterman and John Hazell have continued to create a digitally indexed collection of local history news cuttings – a process they began an amazing eight years ago. Also for the eighth year running, Steve Tofts has taken his inimitable Archives photographs. The contributions of Becky Mather, David Mather and Sarah Villiers, who have assisted in numerous ways, are also much valued, as are those of Joe White, Philip Hoare, Doug Robinson and Sue Curragh.

All the Archives volunteers were invited to the event at Wells Town Hall on 22 February 2019 at which the first ever Council Award was presented by Wells City Council to Tony Scrase, the distinguished historian of Wells. The volunteers were invited at the suggestion of the City Council's Archives Committee, who wanted the volunteers' wonderful work for the Archives to be recognised. Following the presentation, drinks and a buffet supper were served.

We warmly remember the late Bob Marley, who was endlessly helpful from the moment the Archivist first arrived at the Museum. We also mourn the loss of Keith Dyke, a much valued Museum volunteer who helped greatly with the Archives in our early days at the Museum. Sadly we also lost Janet James this year, a keen volunteer and the producer, with her husband Peter, of beautiful local history displays.

15. Relationships with external bodies

Dr Wood continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group, of which she is chair, and the Archives and Records Association South West Region.

16. Training and conferences

Dr Wood attended training on Data Protection and GDPR. This, together with forward planning, ensured that the Archives was ready for the introduction of the new GDPR regulation on data protection and privacy in May 2018.

17. Future targets

The Archivist's major target for 2019-20 is to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online. It is also hoped to launch the first three of the online Archives databases. 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 only part-time.