

# WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

## ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2019 - 3 April 2020

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 21 September 2020

### Summary

This has been the ninth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum. Less was achieved than usual because the Archivist was off sick from March until August. Jonathan Chivers did a terrific job as Acting Archivist during the five months she was off, and maintained a limited Archives service at the Museum. Dr Wood wishes to express her deep gratitude to him for his excellent work in this role. He continued to monitor and maintain the appropriate environmental conditions for the collection, conducted three tours of the Archives, and also managed to respond to some enquiries and receive some visitors – all in half a day a week.

Because of the Archivist's absence, it was not possible to maintain a focus on promoting the Archives and making them more accessible. However, dedicated volunteers continued development work on a major digitisation project even during the Archivist's period off sick. As ever, the Archivist is extremely grateful for the indispensable contribution made by Archives volunteers, particularly Jonathan Chivers (Archives Assistant), and for all the help given by the Curator. Dr Wood also wishes to pay tribute to the late Councillor Maureen Brandon, former Mayor of Wells, and a great supporter of the Archives and stalwart volunteer at HODs.

The major achievements in the City Archives in the year since April 2019 have been:

- Maintaining a limited Archives service at the Museum from April until August 2019, while the Archivist was off work;
- Continuing to develop the unique digital Archives resource entitled *ScraseBase*, a significant database of Wells property histories;

Since August 2019:

- Continuing improved access for readers with the new-style Reading Room;
- Working through the backlog of enquiries and responding to the considerably increased number of new enquiries;
- Continuing to develop the Summary Catalogue and convert it to a format ready for it to go online once it is complete, thereby making the Archives more accessible;
- Engaging with wider audiences and promoting the Archives by contributing to new local history publications.

*The Archivist returned to work on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2019, after five months off sick.*

---

### 1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum has now been running for seven years.
- Between 4 April 2019 and 3 April 2020, there were 55 reader visits and 166 enquiries were received.
- 82% of the requests for visits and enquiries came via the Museum, 15% via the City Council, and the rest were made personally.
- Of the reader visits, 42% concerned local history, 16% family history, 31% house or building history, 5% maps, 2% photographs, and the remaining 4% of visits were specialist in nature. Readers researched subjects including World War Two evacuees to Wells, the Wells Union Workhouse, railways, the Monmouth Rebellion, and the mills of Wells. Specialist visits included one from a representative of the Somerset Branch of the Richard III Society. Recent visitors to the City Archives included one from Sydney, Australia, who came along with three of her English relatives to find out about their Wells connections (*see picture below*). The Archivist, with Clare Blackmore's help, had uncovered an astonishing story for them, including a master builder who constructed many of Wells' significant Victorian buildings, and a tale of hidden treasure.
- Of the written enquiries, 39% concerned local history (for instance, the history of Mendip Hospital, and of Wells elections from 1832-68, for the History of Parliament Trust), 17% family history (including one from an Australian regarding court records for his ancestor who was sentenced as a convict in Wells 1850 and transported), and 20% house or building history (including properties in Tor Street and Wookey Hole Road). 10% were photographic queries (including sourcing images for



Wells City Archives



*Australian Catherine Hocroft and her family visiting the Archives*

planned books), 11% were general enquiries, and the final 3% were specialist in nature. The latter included recommending somebody to be interviewed for a film about Wells and changes since the 1930s.

- 84% of reader visits were by members of the general public, 1% by academics or students, and 15% by non-academics intending to publish. As for written enquiries, 72% were from members of the general public, 1% from the media, 3% from City Councillors, 5% from academics or students, 13% from non-academics intending to publish, and 6% from archivists and heritage professionals.
- The majority of readers came from Wells and the Mendip area, but there were also visitors from Bristol, Dorset, Norwich, London and Australia. Nearly all the written enquiries came from Britain, but there were also emails from Sweden, Austria, the USA, Canada and Australia.

## 2. Archives Reading Room

The monthly Archives Reading Room session in the Lecture Hall was in abeyance during the absence of the Archivist but resumed on her return. Once again, it proved extremely popular. Jonathan Chivers made possible limited access to the Archives during the Archivist's months off sick.

## 3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

The City Archives did not participate in Heritage Open Days this year because the Archivist's absence through sickness meant no preparation was possible.

## 4. Exhibitions

In 2018, Wells City Archives had collaborated with the Wells Mills Interest Group to produce (for Heritage Open Day) a new exhibition they had researched and written, called "Mills of Wells". Thanks to a lot of effort by the Mills Interest Group (especially David Mather and Lou Bailey), an extended version of this exhibition ran at Wells Museum from 24<sup>th</sup> October until 16<sup>th</sup> November 2019. An impressive total of 1,031 people visited the Museum during this period. This gives an indication of how popular the exhibition was (although we are not sure whether every one of these people viewed the display).

In addition to this, there have been several displays at Wells Town Hall using material from the Archives. These included 'Archivist's Choice' displays on the Tin Tabernacle at Launcherley, on alterations planned to The Crown and the Market Place in the 1980s, and on the Bishop Bekynton Ceremony in which Councillors take part every January. The first of these was created by the Archivist, and the two latter by Sarah Wride, Assistant to the Archivist at the Town Hall. Sarah also created a display which showcased two of the children's robes owned by the Council and previously worn by the Boy or Girl Mayor and their Town Crier.

## 5. Tours and other outreach events

During 2019-20, Jonathan Chivers led three tours of the City Archives while he was Acting Archivist. After her return, the Archivist conducted one tour for new Museum volunteers and another for City Councillors. Outreach events were not possible this year.

## 6. Local history publications



During the year, Wells Museum published a third local history book, “The Mills of Wells” by Wells Mills Interest Group, and other publishers released three more Wells-related history books. The Archivist helped with all these publications, for example, by responding to authors’ enquiries and by facilitating numerous visits to the City Archives, where she guided them to unique source documents. Images of documents held in the City Archives appeared in all of them. This all helps promote the collection. The other three books were: “A History of Wells City Band” by Sue Caola; “The City Arms – Wells” by Clare Blackmore and David Mather; and

“Charles Heal and Sons’ Big Shows” by Guy Belshaw and Richard Green.

We are extremely grateful to Guy and Richard for their large donation to the City Archives from the profits of their book, which was spent on the first brand new laptop the Archives has ever owned.

Much research was also carried out in the City Archives ready for two forthcoming publications by Sarah Villiers: one on the “Manufactories of Wells” and another on the history of St Cuthbert Street.



Sarah Villiers and Lou Bailey at the “Mills of Wells” exhibition with the Mills Interest Group’s new book

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

Security measures were kept under review.

#### 8. Conservation and preservation issues

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

#### 9. Cataloguing and listing

Dr Wood has made the Summary Catalogue and high-level cataloguing one of her primary focusses since she returned to work, along with progressing the cataloguing backlog. The City Archives Catalogue will be released online once it is complete. It is intended to release it (a) on the forthcoming Wells City Archives website (*see point 11 below*) and (b) as part of The National Archives’ (TNA’s) online national collections catalogue, ‘Discovery’. The latter will be done as part of TNA’s new ‘Manage Your Collections’ initiative.

#### 10. Archives development and accessibility

As regards the Archives’ digitisation projects, development work has continued on *ScraseBase*, the groundbreaking new database of Wells property histories. It contains data (much from the City Archives) researched and generously shared by historian Tony Scrase. *ScraseBase* will eventually be released online for free consultation by members of the public.

In a momentous achievement, Stage 1 of creating *ScraseBase* (initial data entry of all 4,000+ index cards) was completed in January 2020. Huge thanks are given to volunteers Austin Little and Clare Blackmore, who have beavered away so hard on creating it and entering all the data. We are now in a position to embark on Stage 2 of the project, but unfortunately the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted any further work on it. Stage 2 will entail reviewing the enormous database to ensure that consistent standards have been applied throughout and to remove basic transcription errors. Once the database is in a clean condition, the records will then have to be checked with Tony Scrase and any outstanding queries resolved. In parallel with these activities, technical work will be needed to determine the most appropriate tools and methods for enabling users to obtain access to the data via the internet and then trial the solution adopted.

This year has also, thanks to volunteers, seen a considerable advance on another Archives digitisation project: that of creating a database which summarises the contents of the rare Victorian Wells Petty Sessions collection. Summary data for 1850-1874 had already been entered into Excel files. During the year 2019-2020, data on all the available cases between 1822-1849 and 1875-1886 has also been

extracted and entered. Only 8 years now remain to be summarised and digitised before the entire nineteenth-century run of Wells Petty Sessions data is ready to be made freely available online.

Unfortunately, the launch of the first three of the online Archives databases (Sacrament Certificates, 1860 Property Register and Petty Sessions 1850-1874) has yet again been delayed (*see next point*).

#### 11. Wells City Archives website project

Unfortunately the dedicated searchable City Archives website which the City Council's Archives Committee agreed to fund in February 2019 is still on hold, pending review of the Council's overall website strategy and provision.

This means that the first three of the online Archives databases have still not been released. Given how much effort on the part of volunteers and the Archivist went into preparing them, it is planned as an interim measure to release some of them via the Museum's website as downloadable PDFs. They will be searchable, but functionality will be limited, so this is only a temporary measure.

#### 12. Volunteers

During 2019-20, volunteers have once again generously contributed their time and talents towards helping the Archives, and this is valued enormously.

Jonathan Chivers has unfailingly continued to provide vital all-round help as Archives Assistant for half a day every week, as he has now been doing for over 5 years. Austin Little and Clare Blackmore have continued to carry out painstaking data analysis and entry, whilst Wendy Osterman and John Hazell have completed their ninth year of producing a digitally indexed collection of local history news cuttings. Steve Tofts has continued taking excellent photographs of Archives documents and Peter Trueman has contributed greatly to archival listing and cataloguing. Joe White has provided sterling IT support.

#### 13. Training and conferences

Dr Wood has attended a training course on "Excel for Archivists" (Levels One and Two). This is invaluable because it equips her to create the new Archives Catalogue in Excel format without the need for purchasing extremely expensive proprietary archival software. She will be able to upload from this format direct to the Wells City Archives website and also to The National Archives' new collections template, from which it will be released online as part of their national catalogue.

#### 14. Coronavirus

On Government advice to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Wells City Archives and Wells & Mendip Museum were closed on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020 until further notice. From 18<sup>th</sup> March, the Archivist worked her Museum hours from home. She focussed on two areas: responding to email enquiries and progressing creation of the first proper archival catalogue of the City Archives collection.

#### 15. Future targets

The Archivist's major target for 2020-21 is to progress the work needed in order to complete the new Archives Catalogue and get it online. It is also hoped to launch the first three of the online Archives databases as downloadable PDFs. Despite coronavirus, the Archives remains open to email, written and telephone enquiries. At present it is unknown when it will again be possible to welcome Archives readers. As soon as the Archivist begins working in the Museum again, her immediate priority will be to check the physical state of the collection.