

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 4 April 2020 - 3 April 2021

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 22 June 2021



Summary

This has been the tenth year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum. Unsurprisingly, far less than usual was achieved because of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The Archivist was on furlough for most of the year covered by this report, and the Museum was either closed or open only for restricted hours. The Archives were not accessible to the public and the response to enquiries was limited. However, dedicated Archives volunteers continued development work remotely on several major projects right through the three lockdowns, assisted by the Archivist on a voluntary basis. As ever, she values enormously the indispensable contribution made by volunteers, and all the help given by the Curator.

The major achievements in the City Archives in the year since April 2020 have been:

- Monitoring regularly the environmental conditions in and security of the Museum Strong Room (carried out almost entirely by the Curator).
- Auditing the physical condition of key items in the historic collection in October 2020.
- Maintaining a limited enquiry service until 30th June 2020 and starting to catch up with accrued enquiries during October 2020.
- Continuing to develop the Summary Catalogue until 30th June 2020.
- Continuing to develop the unique digital Archives resource entitled ScraseBase and digitising the Patrick Brown Slide Collection (both carried out voluntarily).
- Engaging with audiences and promoting the Archives through volunteer projects such as the World War Two Commemoration Project (carried out voluntarily).

1. Coronavirus and furlough and the closure of the Museum

During the whole of this year, the Archivist had only just over a month in at work. On Government advice to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Wells City Archives and Wells & Mendip Museum were closed on 17th March 2020. From 18th March, the Archivist worked her Museum hours from home, until 30th June, when the Museum ceased employing her (see point 14 below). She had been on furlough for her City Council hours since early spring; and from 1st July, when she became solely a City Council employee, she was furloughed by the City Council for all her hours.

She returned to work on Monday 28th September 2020, and by this time she was fortunately once again able to access the Museum Strong Room on Mondays, though she was based mostly at the Town Hall. She was furloughed again from 5th November and was still on furlough at the end date of the period covered by this report.

2. Enquiries

Between 4 April 2020 and 3 April 2021, 82 enquiries were received. One of the two areas on which the Archivist focussed which she was working her Museum hours at home (18th March-30th June 2020) was that of keeping up to date with email enquiries. In this way, a limited service was maintained from the beginning of the closed period until the end of June. Although Dr Wood had no access to the physical Archives, the large range of digital resources which she and volunteers have created over the last nine years helped enormously in responding helpfully to research enquiries.

During her month back in at work during October 2020 she had chance to catch up with some of the enquiries, but from when she was furloughed again on 5th November, email enquiries were not responded to other than by an automatic message explaining that she was on furlough (as had happened from July to September).

3. Readers

On Government advice to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Wells City Archives was closed to the public on 17th March 2020, and it remained closed to readers for the rest of the year under review. The Archivist arranged for both the Museum and City Council websites to feature messages explaining that

the City Archives could not make research appointments at present, but a safe re-opening was being planned.

4. Heritage Open Days and 'Wake Up Wells Community Day' 2020

Both these events in which the City Archives was to have participated were cancelled because of coronavirus.

5. Exhibitions and displays

The "Mills of Wells" exhibition ran at the Bishop's Palace from 24th September to 14th October 2020. It had been commissioned by the Archivist and created by the Wells Mills Interest Group for Heritage Open Day 2018 at the Town Hall and featured images of Archives documents. In October 2020, the Archivist created two new Town Hall displays. One was an Archivist's Choice display to tie in with Black History Month, and the other was about the men and women of Wells who died whilst serving in World War Two, to tie in with the 75th anniversary of the end of that war. (A related online exhibition is mentioned in point 11.)

6. Tours and other outreach events

No tours or outreach events were possible this year.

7. Local history publications

During the year, Archives and Museum volunteer Sarah Villiers published her local history book entitled "A Street through Time, 1770-2020", which focusses on St Cuthbert Street. Sarah had carried out much of her research for this book in the City Archives, referred to these unique sources, and also included illustrations featuring Archives documents. This all helps promote the Archives collection.

8. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

The Archivist is extremely grateful to the Curator for keeping a regular check on the security of the Museum Strong Room while she has been at home.

9. Conservation and preservation issues

She also wishes to thank the Curator for keeping a regular check on the environmental conditions in the Museum Strong Room while she has not been in, and for taking the necessary action to achieve appropriate conditions. During her month back in October 2020, the Archivist and her long-serving volunteer Archives Assistant, Jonathan Chivers, were able to check on the environment in the Strong Room themselves and make the necessary adjustments. The Archivist also arranged for servicing of the Archives' digital datalogger used there. During this month, her key priority was auditing the physical condition of the most important items in the historic collection. The outcome was reassuring.

10. Cataloguing and listing

While the Archivist was working from home for her Museum hours (18th March-30th June 2020), the other one of the two areas on which she focussed was progressing creation of the first proper archival catalogue of the City Archives collection.

11. Archives development and accessibility

Throughout the period of the coronavirus pandemic, impressive work by volunteers has continued to take place on several significant volunteer Archives projects, including digitisation projects. Two of these were released to the public during the year, which has all helped maintain the profile of the Archives and provide a form of accessibility even when the physical Archives have been closed. While the Archivist was furloughed, she participated in several of these projects on a voluntary basis, in some cases managing them, in others, contributing material or editorial skills.

i. World War Two Commemoration Project

The Archivist collaborated on a voluntary basis on a joint City Archives and Museum project to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two. She helped Archives volunteer Peter Trueman (who led the project) research a brief biography of each of the 39 Wells men and women who died during World War Two and are named on Wells War Memorial. When Covid-19 restrictions



allowed, she went to interview several surviving relatives, and it was possible to track down photos of 17 of the 39. Invaluable contributions were made to the project by members of the community. The findings were posted from VJ-Day (15th August 2020) onwards on the Museum's social media and (in longer form) on its website, and met a very rewarding response.

Albert Keniston, one of the Wells men who died
 Photograph courtesy of Elaine Watson, Albert's granddaughter

Remembrance Day 2020 saw the release of the research on the Museum's website as an online exhibition, thanks to the technical wizardry of Museum Trustee Joe White. It remains available. The Archivist sent 98 emails promoting the project widely amongst local groups, organisations and individuals, and with the local press, and Peter was interviewed about it on BBC Radio Somerset in December 2020. Overall, the project received an outstandingly positive response and good press coverage. James Heapey, MP for Wells, wrote, "Thank you for providing this fantastic service [the online exhibition] when we were unable to mark Armistice Day in the usual way due to the coronavirus pandemic. As Minister for the Armed Forces and having served myself, I am immensely proud of all in the constituency have done to mark this important period of time". Other comments included, "This is beautifully put together", "Very moving", and "A truly fitting tribute to those men and women of Wells who lost their lives in WW2". An audit of webpage hits on the Museum's website during 2020 shows that the webpage for this project was the second most visited page on the website, especially in November (the first being the homepage). (Many thanks to Joe for these figures.)

ii. ScraseBase

Development work has continued on this vast database of Wells property histories (as researched and generously shared by historian Tony Scrase). Stage 1 (initial data entry) having been completed, stalwart Archives volunteer Austin Little embarked on Stage 2 of the project. This comprises reviewing the database for consistency, queries raised, and accuracy. The Archivist voluntarily carried out the proof checking, while Tony Scrase wrote introductory notes. The next stage will be to prepare the database for release online for free consultation by members of the public. Many of the sources for this database are contained in the City Archives.

iii. The Patrick Brown Slide Collection

In February 2020, the City Archives' already extensive holdings on the history of many house[JT1]s in Wells had been enhanced with the generous donation by Patrick Brown of his slides of Wells properties. They dates from the mid-1950s onwards. During lockdown, longstanding volunteer Allen Cotton digitised the entire collection of almost 900 slides, thereby making them accessible. Another volunteer, Alan Pringle, began creating a listing identifying the properties, since the collection had no accompanying documentation. The collection will be a valuable complement to ScraseBase.



This image of the Market Place shows past businesses such as Peter Wride's, Gregory's Radio and Underdown's.
 Photograph by Patrick Brown,
 Image © Wells City Council Archives

iv. Jean Imray's book on the history of Wells almshouses

The first Wells City Archivist, Jean Imray, sadly died in 2015 without completing her book on the history of the Wells almshouses. A number of her former friends and colleagues felt that it would be a fitting tribute to her to ensure that the work was published. Accordingly, Frances Neale and Anne Crawford, both former Wells Cathedral Archivists, undertook to check and prepare her typescript for printing. Unfortunately, the process stalled, but happily it restarted in January 2021. The Archivist took on the

voluntary editing, typesetting, sourcing of illustrations, and coordination of the completion and printing of this book. It will be published by Wells & Mendip Museum.

v. International Women's Day – 8th March 2020

To mark this day, a post prepared voluntarily by the Archivist went out on the Museum's social media, featuring an historic letter from the City Archives. The letter illustrates part of the fight for women to get the vote in the UK and was sent by the suffragist Lydia Becker to Wells City Council in 1879.

12. 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 still remains on hold, pending review of the Council's overall website strategy and provision. The plan is to release on this website both the Archives catalogue and the various online Archives databases. As an interim measure, given the long delay, it is planned to release some of these via the Museum's website as downloadable PDFs. They will be searchable, but functionality will be limited, so this is only a temporary measure.

13. Volunteers

The Archivist wishes to express her deep gratitude to the volunteers who have continued working on the projects mentioned above during the year 2020-21, generously contributing their time and skill.

She is sad to report that Wendy Osterman and John Hazell stood down from volunteering in September 2020. John has volunteered for the City Archives since 2011, and Wendy since not long after. John helped with the start of the digital catalogue, and the two of them have long been producing a digitally indexed collection of local history news cuttings. They will be much missed.

14. City Archivist's post

There has been a change in the Archivist's employment status. Since 1st July 2020, she no longer splits her City Archivist's post between two employers. Formerly she worked for Wells & Mendip Museum on a part-time self-employed basis in addition to working part-time as an employee of the City Council. Since 1st July 2020, she is solely a part-time employee of the Council, working 19 hours per week. She is still working at both the Museum and the Town Hall.

15. Future targets

The Archivist's major target for 2021-22 is to progress the work needed in order to complete the new Archives Summary Catalogue and get it online, thereby making the Archives more accessible. This will include converting it to a format ready for it to go online. First, however, when she returns to work, the Archivist must carry out some key actions in order to make up for time lost during the pandemic and deal with the accrued backlog of tasks. Here careful prioritisation is critical. The first priority will be to check the physical state of the collection, then to catch up with outstanding enquiries. Plans will also need to be made and protocols developed so that the Archives can be safely re-opened to readers when possible. Essential aspects of caring for and managing the collection will need to be attended to.