

WELLS CITY ARCHIVES AT WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM

ANNUAL REPORT, 2013-2014

Julia K. Wood, Archivist, 12 May 2014

Summary

This has been the third year of Wells City Archives at Wells & Mendip Museum. Great strides have once again been made during a very busy year. The major achievements since April 2013 have been an enthusiastic uptake by readers during the first year of the newly-opened City Archives Reading Room and an extremely encouraging response from the efforts expended on raising the public profile of the Archives (particularly with "Explore Your Archive"). A caveat concerning the success of the promotional strategy is that it is proving hard to cope with demand, given the resources available. This year has also seen excellent feedback from the Engagement Manager (West) for The National Archives, following his visit. Major targets for 2014-15 are: (a) to consolidate the progress made over the last three years (giving attention to basic archival procedures such as listing and preservation) and (b) to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online.

The Archivist wishes to acknowledge the invaluable support and encouragement she has received from the Honorary Curator of the Museum.

1. Readers and enquiries – the statistics

- The City Archives Reading Room at the Museum opened to the public on 26 March 2013. The regular readers' slot is on a Tuesday morning, with visits by prior appointment only. It has proved extremely popular.
- Between 4 April 2013 and 3 April 2014, there were 57 reader visits and 84 enquiries were received. Moreover, the Archivist led seven tours of the City Archives (the most recent for Wells Bookworms, the children's book club).
- The annual number of readers has more than trebled compared to the previous year. The figure for the annual number of enquiries represents a rise of about one third compared to 2012-13.
- Just over two thirds of the requests for visits and enquiries came via the Museum, and the rest via the City Council. This represents a reversal of the previous pattern and probably reflects a greater awareness of the presence of the City Archives at the Museum.
- Readers researched subjects ranging from the charter fairs and the Wells bread riot to the Monmouth Rebellion.
- Examples of the types of enquiry received are: (a) local history (including that of the City Council), e.g. The Cedars during the First World War, William Cody's visit to Wells in 1895, and Mayors of Wells; (b) family history, such as details on the Tyte family and on Dr Henry Livett; (c) house or building history, regarding properties such as Stoberry Park House and Keward Mill; (d) mapping enquiries, e.g. concerning the Recreation Ground; (e) photographic enquiries, for instance, a request for illustrations for the Bath & West Agricultural Society's anniversary book. Recently a research enquiry arrived requesting information for the TV programme "Who Do You Think You Are?".
- Of the enquiries, 37% per cent concerned local history, 25% family history, and 19% house or building history. The remaining 19% were academic or specialist in nature.
- There is a large backlog of research enquiries awaiting a proper response (beyond an email acknowledging receipt of the enquiry).



ARCHIVE EXPLORED

Part of the poster used for the "Explore Your Archive" event in November 2013

- In order to deal with this, the Archivist recruited a volunteer to help her respond to enquiries, and set up a new email account as part of a new procedure for dealing with enquiries. Sadly, the ill health of the volunteer concerned means this is currently at a standstill.

2. Raising the public profile of the City Archives

The strategy for doing this has included various initiatives. Outreach events like Heritage Open Days and (in particular) “Explore Your Archive” have engaged with a wider public audience. The Archivist has also advertised the collection through exhibitions, submitted numerous stories to the local press, spoken on local radio, given talks on the City Archives, and promoted them on the Museum and City Council websites and in a specially produced new leaflet. The increase in the number of readers and enquirers reflects the raised public profile which these measures have achieved over the last year. A caveat concerning the success of the promotional strategy is that it is proving hard to cope with demand, given the resources available.

3. Heritage Open Days (HODs)

Until October 2013, the Archivist was a leading member of the working group which co-ordinates HODs venues and events in Wells. She took a significant role in preparing and coordinating an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for project funding for developing a walking trail of Wells on future Heritage Open Days. This was the first place in the country to apply to the Heritage Lottery Fund for funding for HODs. Although the application was unsuccessful, a 2013 trail leaflet was published with the assistance of Wells City Council and other organisations involved, and the events in Wells were a great success.

The Archivist organised events at Wells Town Hall, which was open for HODs on Sunday 15 September 2013. She presented displays of material from the City Archives, along with items from the Museum collection. The displays included three of the medieval City Charters, and exhibitions on the history of the Town Hall; the early history of Wells City Police; the Court in Wells; and the country’s first woman Mace-Bearer.

4. “Explore Your Archive”



The Archivist initiated and put together a contribution by Wells to the national “Explore Your Archive” campaign, which was designed to raise public awareness of archives and spearheaded by The National Archives. She organised the various archives of our historic city to come together in partnership, for the first time, to present a programme of special events on three different sites in the City: the Museum, the Town Hall and the Cathedral. The aim was to encourage local people to use the archives and to know what is available to them here in the city.

The event took place on Saturday 16 November 2013. At Wells Town Hall there was a ‘Meet the Archivist’ event plus special displays which included case studies on researching family, house and local history. Family history researchers from the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society were also on hand to answer queries. Somerset Heritage Centre loaned one of the St Cuthbert’s Parish Registers for exhibit. At Wells Cathedral there was a display in the Library. At the Museum, the archives were represented by an exhibition on the Phillips Collection of photographs, researched and coordinated by Dr Wood specially for this event, with contributions from many volunteers and the Somerset and Dorset Family History Society. The “*Archl’ve Explored*” events here also included the opportunity to ‘Meet the Researchers’. Volunteers provided invaluable assistance both in preparing the events and also on the day.

Professional flyers and a fold-out leaflet about the City Archives were produced thanks to a grant from the City Council for project publicity and exhibition materials. There was excellent coverage by local press both before and after the event, and the Archivist did a radio interview with BBC Radio Somerset. The Archives of Wells were included as a special ‘featured site’ on the national campaign website.

A staggering number of visitors attended the events in Wells: over 300 at the Town Hall, 197 at the Cathedral Library, and nearly 100 at the Museum. The events raised the profile of the City Archives, attracted new audiences, and deepened the understanding and support of current users.

5. Exhibitions

The permanent display area within the Museum for exhibitions based around the Wells City Archives collection has been very successful. The first of the temporary displays, that on the early history of Wells Police, has run during this year. Part of the exhibition about the Phillips City Studio which the Archivist organised is now on permanent display in the Museum. City Archives material was also included in several other exhibitions prepared by Dr Wood and displayed at the Town Hall: one on the Council's Serjeants-at-Mace, one on Wells' twinning with Bad Durkheim, and one to mark the official opening of the newly redeveloped former Court Room on 15 March 2014.

Exhibitions prepared by other people have been researched in the City Archives too; these include displays on Bob Fry (railwayman), the Bishop's Barn, and the history of the court in Wells. Research is also taking place in the Archives ready for the 'Wells Remembers' exhibition.

The Harry Patch portrait belonging to Wells City Council remains on temporary loan to the Museum, and has been on public display during most of the year.

6. Talks on the City Archives

On 8 and 23 January 2014, the Archivist gave talks entitled "An Introduction to Wells City Archives" to Wells Civic Society and the Westbury Society respectively. The former was reviewed favourably in the local press. In March she spoke to the Friends of Wells Cathedral and Bob Love gave a talk to the WNHAS on Wells Police which was largely based on research he had done in the Archives.

7. Storage and organisation of the Archives in the Museum's Strong Room

The task of organising the Archives in their new home has continued. A list of the location of volumes is currently being drawn up.

8. Strong Room security measures and Security Policy

A key box for spare keys has been installed and caretakers have been advised of security measures.

9. Conservation and preservation issues

Four documents from the Archives have been conserved by the Head of Conservation at Somerset Heritage Centre. Another five have been taken for evaluation. Monitoring of the environmental conditions in the Strong Room has been carried out with a specially purchased 'Tinytag' data logger; it is a state-of-the-art digital monitor.

10. Cataloguing

This year was to see the continuation of Stage 2 of the cataloguing strategy, which comprises adding summary details of the contents of the boxes which have not yet been listed. This stage is still ongoing, as very little time has been available for it during 2013-14. The help of volunteers is vital. Stage 3 will be delivering internet access to the catalogue. It is planned to deliver this in three ways: (i) upload an Excel version of the catalogue to the Museum's website; (ii) upload an Excel version of it to the National Register of Archives (to which there will be a link from ARCHON, the online directory for record repositories); and (iii) add it to the Somerset Archives' online catalogue, using CALM software, with the help of Somerset Heritage Centre. Volunteer Brian Curran is developing a user interface for the Excel versions of the catalogue, to facilitate searching.

11. Digitisation

One of the volunteers continues to photograph items from the City Archives, providing images for use in exhibitions and by researchers.

12. Volunteers

As ever, volunteers are a huge asset to the City Archives at the Museum. Their invaluable assistance is gratefully acknowledged. Many thanks to Bob Love, John Hazell, Wendy Osterman, Steve Tofts, Joan Goddard, Brian Curran, Jeff Allen and Dick Laurence. Numerous other people (including City councillors) have kindly helped too, particularly with the HODs and "Explore Your Archive" events.

13. Visit by The National Archives

In June 2013, Dr Matt Greenhall, the Engagement Manager (West) for The National Archives, visited the City Archives at the invitation of Dr Wood. His feedback was extremely positive. He was very impressed with the collection, and also with the organisation of the Archives and the arrangements for public access. He gave a lot of useful advice, including discussion of promoting the City Archives as a heritage asset which can be part of the tourist offer by Wells. Since his visit, he has directed to the Archivist somebody who needed advice on creating a small archive at Hoar Oak Cottage, Exmoor. The new Archivist at Downside Abbey has also visited for advice.

14. Development of relationships with external bodies

During the year, the Archivist has continued to attend meetings of the Mid-Somerset Archivists' and Curators' Group (which has been hosted at the Museum), and the Archives and Records Association's SW regional group. She has also liaised with the Cathedral School and Bishops Palace Archivists.

In October 2013, Dr Wood took up the post of Archivist at Wells Cathedral, which she now combines with her posts at the City Council and at Wells Museum. She hopes to use the unique privilege of having oversight of the City and Cathedral Archives in order to develop joint projects.

15. Future targets

In previous years, the major targets from the first and second phases of establishing the City Archives at the Museum have been achieved. This year, activities from both phases have continued (for instance, developing resources to improve our services, such as new information leaflets about the collection). Progress has been made with the third phase, which entails the improvement of services to readers and those making enquiries. Standard procedures for dealing with remote research enquiries (enquiries from the public) have been established, but it is a necessity to find a volunteer who can assist with this. Another target is to establish a scale of reproduction charges.

The promotional strategy which has been pursued this year has been highly successful.

The major targets for 2014-15 are: (a) to consolidate the progress made over the last three years (giving attention to basic archival procedures such as listing and preservation) and (b) to progress the work needed in order to get the Summary Catalogue online.