

## **Curator's Report 2018**

### **Governance and Management**

In June we welcomed Colin Price as Trustee nominated by Wells City Council in place of John Osman. Also in the Summer we sadly lost Rob Marley, a Trustee with extensive buildings experience, but we were very pleased to appoint Richard Lovegrove as Trustee taking a lead with maintenance and refurbishment. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator, and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Philip Porter and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum caretakers.

### **Exhibitions and Activities**

Throughout 2018 the museum hosted an amazing programme of exhibitions and activities by local artists, craftspeople, and groups and organisations in our main Exhibition Gallery, the Meeting Room, and Lecture Room. Exhibitions included works by Jason Nosworthy, Sue Durrant, Draycott Art Group, Annie Davenport, the Mendip Collaborators, Wells Art Group, and the U3A. There were also exhibitions by Ama Bolton and the ABCD book artists, Derek Ortonjay-Smart, Wendy Lovegrove, Kevin Jones, Phil Wilson, Jocelyn Henfrey, Pauline Spicer, Shelley Dye, Richard Field, and Anna Dmochowski. The museum also hosted the exhibition and sale of some of the remaining works by the late Peter Coate. The museum is very grateful to Christine Fewer for arranging this wide-ranging programme.

Several events related directly to the museum collections:

#### **Samplers**

During September we held an exhibition of the museum's samplers, *Stories of Sampler Stitchers*, that revealed previously untold information about the lives of many of the makers. Museum volunteers Sarah Villiers and Gill Pettitt researched the family histories of some of the makers of the museum's samplers for the exhibition and for the supporting fifty plus page publication. A case of samplers from the exhibition was on display at Reception during Heritage Open Days.

#### **World War One Commemoration**

During October and November the museum contributed to the City's commemoration of the Centenary of the Armistice. The museum published the book 'Lest We Forget...' that gave information about all the men named on the Wells War Memorial, situated outside St Cuthbert's Church, who died in World War One. It was written by Sue Curragh and Pete Trueman with additional information provided by other members of the museum's Wells Remembers Group.

During June and July, Donnie Houser, in conjunction with CND ran an exhibition entitled *The Challenging Road to Peace* which looked at the legacy left by WW1 and what lessons had been learnt.

New panels were installed in the museum's *Wells Remembers* exhibition to keep it current, with thanks to Andy Webb.

During these two months, *Wells Remembers* was visited by many school children. Over 150 came from 3 different schools for teacher led sessions, and around 300 came from five local schools, kindly funded by the Wells Lions/Rotary Group as part of a locally run "Armistice Project".

Donnie Houser, the museums Volunteer Learning Officer, in partnership with Jess Witchell from the Cathedral, also ran workshops with various activities including a tour of *Wells Remembers* for another 180 children from two local schools, and Donnie ran a similar workshop for St Cuthbert's School that was covered by Points West and broadcast on local television.

### **Wells Art Contemporary**

In conjunction with the WAC exhibition at the Bishop's Palace during October, the museum was most pleased to host sixteen contemporary works of art, known as "Interventions". They were made by members of the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen, inspired and informed by the museum's collections, and created a range of novel, contemporarily relevant or poetic 'conversations' between the permanent displays and the intervention works. In addition, Phillipa Threlfall and Clare Blackmore led a free art workshop, also using the collections as inspiration.

### **Phillips photographs**

Also in October Clare Blackmore and helpers including Steve Wilkinson ran the *People of Wells* photographic portraits event. This focussed on portraits from the museum's collection of photographs from Phillips' City Photographic Studio, a Wells business that operated for over 100 years. The event highlighted the importance of the Phillips collection for local and family history studies, and obtained previously unrecorded information about many of the portraits.

### **Search & Learn, the Story of Wells**

Sadly HLF were unable to support the museum's project *Search & Learn, the Story of Wells*. Their decision was disappointing to everybody who invested so much time and effort in the bid. However several positive things have come out of the process:

- Our thinking on our collections, displays, activities, and community engagement has all been useful and constructive.
- The museum is working more closely with other organisations to raise the profile of Wells' heritage.

We have been told that HLF recognises the need for the project, and they have invited us to reapply after the HLF criteria for grants change in April 2019. To this end the museum has contracted the museum consultant Melita Armitage to reformulate the *Search & Learn* submission. Refurbishing the two 'Wells rooms' on the first floor of the museum remains the museum's primary strategic priority.

## **Collections**

This year 67 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. Thirteen of these are newly acquired material, and 54 accessions of items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

In February a significant group of animal bones excavated from Chelm's Combe Shelter was returned from the Natural History Museum where they had been taken in the 1980s for research. The museum is very grateful to Dr Roula Pappa of the NHM for facilitating their return.

In August the museum was loaned a lantern clock made by John Webb of Wells in 1674. The lender, James Bellchambers, plans to bequeath the clock to the museum on his death, a very generous gift. It is the intention to display the clock in one of the cases in the Wells galleries.

A coin hoard from Westbury-sub-Mendip arrived at the museum during August. This comprised 89 Roman bronze radiate coins and 8 associated items found at the same metal detectorist rally in 2016 at which the Westbury-sub-Mendip ingot was unearthed. The coins were disclaimed as Treasure and given to the museum by the finder. Accessioned as 2017.12 the intention is to put them on display.

Also in August the museum was given a small part of the aluminium fuselage of a Heinkel bomber that crashed at Charterhouse during World War Two. It is a very telling reminder of how the war affected people locally and the human cost of the war. Mendip's wartime history is unique. There was a 'decoy city' at Blackdown to draw German bombers away from Bristol, and the Wells Home Guard planned to use suitable caves for operations in the event of a German invasion.

## **Conservation**

As a museum we put great stead in passive conservation, i.e. storing and displaying objects where they will not be damaged by light, insect infestation or mould. The strong room store, with its managed environment, is essential for this as it is where most of the museum's collections are housed, and I am very grateful to the Building Maintenance volunteers for their help moving material in the store to make the most of the space. This also allowed us to move the W. & H. Paul handcart into the store.

A system of hessian window blinds are now available for use in the bay window of the exhibition room when appropriate. Although there is UV protective film on the glass, light levels are too high to safely display textiles and works of art.

There has been fundraising throughout 2018 for two conservation projects. The museum is very grateful to Andrew Fawcett and Clare Blackmore for raising money to redisplay the Swan, and to Sarah Villiers and Gill Pettitt for fundraising towards sampler conservation.

We have also updated our Emergency Plan, so that we are prepared for any eventuality that would threaten the care and security of the collections. This is a complex document and we are very grateful to Christine Fewer for producing it.

## **Documentation**

The Collections volunteers have continued to meet regularly on Mondays updating the computer records, improving descriptions, and recording current locations. This is detailed and painstaking work that has real benefits. The current number of entries in the museum database is 27,764 compared with 25,210 in January, an increase of c.2,500 records. We are very grateful to Joan Goddard, Mike Balch, Richard Kilroy, Peter Missingham, Joseph White, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts for their sterling efforts.

The Wells Pottery Group (David Dawson, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson) has continued working on the Wells Museum Garden collections, again on Mondays. The group are using the WMG assemblage to establish a sub-regional type reference collection.

In May we benefitted from a study visit by the eminent Mendip geologist Peter Burr. Over a two-week period he examined some 2,000 specimens, identifying and providing invaluable information about them. We now know so much more about the museum's mineral collection.

## **Research**

Researcher Tony Audsley has studied the Neolithic and Bronze Age human remains from Bone Hole, Cheddar Gorge, comparing them with the Charterhouse Warren Farm Shaft human remains. His conclusion is that they are very different assemblages despite being of similar age, and the findspots being geographically very close.

Associate Professor R. Shulting of Oxford University Archaeology Department was successful in obtaining NRCF funding to Radio Carbon date (C14) ten specimens of human remains from various horizons at Charterhouse Warren Farm Shaft, and one from remains excavated from Nettlebridge Shelter. This information will add considerably to what is known about these finds.

In September we hosted a Royal Holloway University PhD student Patrick Keane who re-examined the Ice Age animal bones from Milton Hill Fissure. Several of these are currently being studied in more detail at Royal Holloway as they may be rhinoceros, previously not recorded from this site. The museum is also grateful to Professor Danielle Schreve of Royal Holloway University for her expertise and support.

## **Library**

The library continues to thrive under the care of Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian, supported by the Library volunteers.

35 new titles were added (46 in 2017), and recorded research sessions were 110 in 2018 (135 in 2017). Our random collection of unbound national and local newspapers is now fully inventoried and is soon to appear on the database.

There were two library exhibitions begun during 2018: *In and Out: Migration to and from Wells 1840s to 1880s* curated by Sarah Villiers assisted by Richard Lovegrove, and *Drinking from Glass* curated by Katy Stenhouse. The latter features books from the bequest of Astrid Klenz and is linked to the museum's Klenz collection of ancient drinking glasses.

Several in-house research projects by volunteers are underway. Eric Preston has listed chronological and commodity histories of High Street shops from the 1700s onwards, and an edition for sale is being considered. His previous paper on the later history of Clares is in the library. Jennifer Williams is working on *Crime Prevention in Wells before the Police*. Her earlier research project, based on the minutes of the Wells Reading Society 1820s to 1860s, is also in the library.

### **Wells City Archives**

2018 was another extremely successful year for the City Archives. Promoting the collection and improving its accessibility were important focuses. The National Archives' Engagement Officer for the West visited in August and was particularly impressed by our outreach work and digitisation projects. As ever, Dr Julia Wood the Wells City Archivist acknowledges her gratitude for the invaluable contribution made by Archives volunteers.

Outreach events which showcased the Archives collection and engaged with wider audiences included a *Victorian Evening* which the Archivist helped plan. Inspired by nineteenth-century menus held in the Archives, it comprised a Victorian-themed fundraising dinner held at the Swan last February in aid of the museum and Macmillan Cancer Support. The City Archives also contributed to an exciting new community project, the *Southover History Project*. Dr Wood and Jonathan Chivers ran two House History Workshops and provided copies of Archive documents for the project's St Etheldreda's Day event in June. The Archivist then collaborated with the recently-formed Wells Mills Interest Group to produce a new exhibition they had researched and written, called *Mills of Wells*. Displayed at the Town Hall for one day - Heritage Open Day - along with other Archives displays, it attracted a spectacular total of 821 visitors. It will run at the museum this autumn. Finally, Dr Wood worked on a Mayoral World War One commemorative project, *We Will Remember Them*. It focussed on the shops of Wells and the men from them who served during the war. Specially created posters were displayed in 29 Wells shop windows for the month of November, with a trail leading people along the route. Many photographs from the museum's collection were included in the posters.

Numerous enquiries were responded to and many readers were welcomed, with improved access since February through a new monthly Reading Room session in the Lecture Hall. Dr Wood and Jonathan Chivers spent much time focussing on the Summary Catalogue, which will be released online once it is complete. The Archives' digitisation projects continued and expanded. The unique online Archives databases (containing data from Archives documents) progressed and the first batch should go live in 2019. A groundbreaking new digital project began: a database named 'ScraseBase' after Tony Scrase, the eminent Wells historian. It summarises Tony's extensive research into properties in Wells, much of which was carried out in the City Archives. 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. Finally, investigation began into the possibility of a dedicated City Archives website.

## **Publications**

The museum now has a 'house style' for publications. This adopts best practice for accessibility, legibility and comprehension and gives publications an 'identity' that hopefully encourages their sale, and promotes the museum and its collections to the public. Both publications mentioned earlier, *Stories of Sampler Stitchers* and *Lest We Forget...* have been produced in this style.

Five bi-monthly issues of the Museum Newsletter were published and circulated to museum 'Friends' and local press.

## **Website and Social Media**

The nature of the museum's digital presence is also most important for the same reasons, and we are very grateful to Joseph White for overhauling our website and his digital expertise. We have also been paying attention to the content of our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram social media accounts again to promote the museum and its activities to new audiences.

## **Building, Garden, and Shop**

As the museum is situated in an extensive post-medieval Grade 2 listed building within the Conservation Area, repairs and upkeep are complex and costly but essential for the museum to continue to offer its users a high standard of visit. We have an incredibly skilled group of volunteers who work with Trustee Richard Lovegrove to keep the museum looking presentable and safe. Their two most significant improvements this year have been to refurbish the main Exhibition Room and the Lecture Hall. Both these spaces now look most attractive. In addition, the Lecture Hall has a new hearing loop.

Also this year our gardener of several years Susan Bates resigned. We are most grateful for her skilled work in the garden as a most knowledgeable plantswoman. However we now have a very keen and effective Garden team lead by Cathy Allen and Lynne Smith that are pressing on with developing the garden into a space that is both a beautiful and reflective space but also an 'outside room' that we can use as a venue. In September we held a Garden Open Day to advertise and promote it as a space for hire.

The museum shop, managed by Sue Marley, continues to stock a wide range of attractive and useful books, cards, and souvenirs for visitors and residents alike.

## **Rural Proofing Resilience**

The museum joined the HLF funded 'Rural Proofing Resilience' programme during the Autumn. The programme is designed to help independent organisations become more resilient and we are already benefiting from training and advice.

## **Outreach and Collaborative Working**

The museum was involved in several events and activities that have brought the museum to the attention of wider audiences.

A very successful Wells Traders' Evening was held at the museum in February organised by Andrew Fawcett and Clare Blackmore. Dr Wood gave a presentation about the Archives collection where she highlighted the documents it contains which local traders could use in promoting their businesses or decorating their premises.

## **Marketing and Tourism**

The Visitor Information Service for Wells continues to operate from the museum, with support from Mendip Tourism. The museum was actively involved with initiatives to promote tourism in the City, such as Visit Wells. The contribution that the museum makes to tourism was recognised by winning the 'Believe in Somerset' award for its contribution to tourism. The award is sponsored by Care UK and the Trinity Mirror Group, and recognised the part played by the museum and the Visitor Information Service in promoting Wells as a tourist destination.

## **Partners and Stakeholders**

The museum is a member of the newly founded Wells Heritage Partners. The partnership between the Cathedral, Bishop's Palace, Bishop's Barn, and the museum aims to see that Wells' mediaeval quarter is internationally recognised, enjoyed and treasured by its community now and for the next 1000 years. The purpose of Wells Heritage Partners is to deliver a sustainable future for Wells' heritage by:

- Conserving the mediaeval core for future generations
- Working collaboratively to champion Wells as a heritage visitor destination
- Improving the experience and enjoyment of the City for those who visit, work and live here
- Raising funds to deliver joint initiatives.

## **Finance**

The museum continues to maintain a good working relationship with Wells City Council. Grants and donations received this year included the Wells Lodge of the Freemasons, Rothschild in the Community, Awards for All, the Wells Natural History and Archaeology Society, Wells Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, the Swan Hotel, the Waitrose Counter Scheme, Elizabeth Hawkes, the Wells U3A, Sue Isherwood, and the Southover Project. The hire of the Lecture Hall and Meeting Room by outside groups continues to contribute significantly to our income.

2018 was overall an amazingly successful year for the museum. We have achieved so much for a small independent organisation, something only possible through the expertise, determination and team work of our sixty plus volunteers, co-ordinated by Janet Rodger. The Board wishes to record its sincere thanks to them all.

David Walker  
Honorary Curator