

Wells & Mendip Museum

Curator's Report January - December 2025

Governance and Management

The board currently comprises eight trustees:

Sue Isherwood - Chairperson

Tim Ritchie – Treasurer

Lynda Armstrong

Jane Burman

Cllr. Denise Denis

Nicola Turner

Tanya Tyreman

Paul Wiltshire

During the year three trustees resigned: Crystal Johnson, Philippa Threlfall and Hannah Bennett, and sadly Richard Lovegrove passed away. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator. Paid staff comprise Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Richard Stephens and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum Caretakers, with Natalie Fewer as Front of House Volunteer Co-ordinator, and Tiana Padfield as Cleaner.

Search & Learn project

The museum's 'Search & Learn' project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), formally ended 31st March 2025.

Exhibitions and Activities

the museum held a full programme of exhibitions and events, both in the first floor Exhibition Room and the ground floor Meeting Room by exhibitors: Tony Martin & Christopher Binding, Kes Robinson, iDartists, Mendip Calligraphy Group, ABCD artists, Draycot Art Club, Phoebe McElhatton & Nic McElhatton, Old Bakery Artists (two exhibitions), Shepton Artists, Anna Dmochowski, Ruth White & Ruth Baker, Paul Davey & Irving Kinnersley, Avalon Stitchers, Quartet of Artists, and Robin Gray.

In September, following complete refurbishment, the museum's Meeting Room reopened under a new name, The Jean Imray Room. The room has been renamed in memory of Jean Imray, a trustee and long-time supporter of the museum who passed away in 2015. The inaugural exhibition was 'Menhir photographic exhibition' by Elizabeth Woodger, commissioned by the Mendip Hills National Landscape Team and Seed Sedgemoor.

In March we hosted the Somerset Archaeology and Natural History Society Annual Archaeology Meeting, and throughout the year three Finds Identification Days, with Laura Beckwith the Finds Liaison Officer for Somerset County Council.

For families we produced a museum Romans trail for the Summer holidays, and over Autumn half term we held a Halloween trail, and a Halloween art competition.

During the year we held two fundraising events, in February an Artists' Postcard Exhibition & fundraising event with support from Wells Rotary, and in November a Italian Wine Tasting event.

Five bi-monthly issues of the Museum Newsletter were published and circulated to museum 'Friends' and local press, and another successful Christmas Craft Market was held in December.

Learning

The museum's schools learning offering was launched in the Summer, following a hand over from learning consultant Katherine Webber. The details are now on the museum website. Selected primary schools were contacted, and several primary schools visited the museum. Three sessions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade workshop were delivered in partnership with the Cathedral and the Bishop's Palace.

Work is underway to develop trails, quizzes, loan boxes and a modular workshop for the new Roman Mendip gallery. We are grateful to Katherine Webber for her work as part of 'Search & Learn', and to trustee Tanya Tyreman and volunteer Amy Lowe for their work.

Collections

During 2025, 22 items, or groups of items, were accessioned into the museum collections. 16 of these were newly acquired material, and 6 were items, or groups of items, already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards. The number of the year's items from individual donors was lower than average, but several were relatively large collections. The museum is particularly grateful to volunteers Joan Goddard, Richard Kilroy, Yona Schwalbe-Goodwin, Steve Tofts, and Pete Missingham for their work.

Conservation

Five pieces of polychrome Chinese porcelain export ware excavated from the Wells Museum Garden in the 1990s were conserved by the Conservation and Archive Service (CMAS) based at Chippenham. Their skilled conservators carried out an extraordinarily piece of delicate work. Three of these items are now permanently on display in the new City Galleries.

In-house we have conserved in-house two pieces of a shale bracelet excavated by the Westbury Society Archaeology Group (WSAG) at their Thornbury site.

Documentation

As part of the Search & Learn project, we acquired Modes Complete relational database for collections management. Tim Burge, ICT expert, migrated the Excel spreadsheet records for the museum and library collections into Modes, and held a training session for museum and library volunteers. This initiative allows museum and library records to be interrogated as one, and allows images of the items to be embedded in their records.

Research

Throughout the year the focus has been on our Roman collections and the history of the local Roman presence, to inform the upcoming Roman Mendip gallery.

Work by David and Vicky Dawson, and Linda Iveson (Wells Pottery Group) continues on the Wells Museum Garden material, which will eventually result in a publication.

Pip Nabb-Osborne and colleagues from the Community Archaeology on the Mendip Plateau group evaluated finds excavated over a decade ago during the community archaeology project at the Cathedral, and which are stored at the museum.

Nicky Amos and colleagues from the WSAG have been studying pottery shards excavated over a century ago by Herbert Balch from Wookey Hole cave, as part of a local typology exercise.

Badger Hole material was reassessed by volunteers Steve Tofts and Joan Goddard, including the identification and repacking of specimens.

A 2024 paper on the Bronze Age human remains from a local cave, Charterhouse Warren Farm Shaft, was shortlisted for an award by Current Archaeology. The remains are in the museum collections.

A paper on the Bronze Age gold bracelet found in Bracelet Cave in Ebbor Gorge by Graham Mullan of the University of Bristol Speleological Society has been published. The museum has a replica of the bracelet on display in the Balch Room.

Interpretation

Following approval to begin work on the proposed new Roman Mendip Gallery the museum contracted Far Post Design to carry out the design and build elements. There have been several briefings to volunteers on the project and the working group and met regularly with Far Post. A successful Crowdfunder was organised by trustee Paul Wiltshire to fund a Roman Mendip activity programme. The construction phase will begin in March 2026 and be complete for Easter 2026.

Earlier in the year the Netherworld of Mendip caving gallery was refurbished by our in-house team, with thanks to Mendip Cave Registry & Archive for financial support.

Three separate 'Curator's Choice' displays were installed throughout the year: Wolves, the Phillips Photographic Studio bell, and a bowl was presented to Mrs Thomas of the Wells Young Men's Christian Association by the Motor Transport Army Service Corps.

Library

New additions to the library catalogue

66 new titles have been accepted for the library during 2025 and added to the library catalogue. This includes 8 titles to the Coleridge archive.

Library volunteers

The museum is most grateful to the following for staffing the library and working on the library collections: Michael Brooks, Nicolas Brown, Keith Cattell, Katy Stenhouse, Mary Sturmer, Yona Schwalbe-Goodwin. Sadly Andrew Haymes stood down as Assistant Librarian, and we thank him for his contribution over the years.

Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian

Wells City Archives

This year Wells City Archives has seen increasing numbers of enquiries, particularly in requests for information by email, continuing the growth in enquiries seen in the previous few years. Three temporary displays have been produced for exhibition in the Town Hall and one of these has received an extension in display at Wells & Mendip Museum. A medieval charter from the collection was displayed at Heritage Open Days

this year, along with a copy of a recently discovered map. Improvements to the description of the community collections has also been achieved.

The numbers of enquiries to Wells City Archives has continued to rise, with a 28% increase in the number of requests for information by email compared to 2024. Topics of interest have been diverse, including motifs in post medieval charters, the Llewellyn's almshouse, Victorian city constables, 19th century architectural designs and 20th century carnivals to name a few. We have received a small number of enquiries from outside the U.K. from Australia and the U.S, however the majority have been from the U.K.

We welcomed 18 visits to the archive, one more than last year, by researchers wishing to view Corporation property surveys, building plans, and tithe map apportionments to name a few.

Monitoring of the storage environment for the collection has continued and temperature and relative humidity conditions have been maintained. Relative humidity levels have been particularly consistent this year.

In 2024, we were very grateful to the Richard III Somerset Branch for donating translations of two pardons in the collection, one granted by Richard III and another granted by Henry VIII. A temporary display was produced by museum volunteers Emma Houston and Eloise Reid for display at the Town Hall in March this year, showing photographs of the pardons with information gained from the translations. Richard III Society Somerset Branch chairman Kieron Malloy added valuable information as the display was transferred to the museum in September where it will be displayed until spring 2026.

A display was also produced showing the history of Mayor-making to coincide with May's ceremony confirming Cllr Louis Agabani as the 651st Mayor of Wells. The production of this display was again assisted by Emma Houston and Eloise Reid, and included the display of the King John Charter, a medieval title deed and the act of Parliament for building the Town Hall during the ceremony.

Eloise Reid produced a further display for the Town Hall focusing on an item of interest in the collection. The item is unusually small book of rules for the Wells Union Workhouse, and the display included an introduction to the history of the Workhouse.

Wells City Archives participated in Heritage Open Days, producing a pop up display looking at the city boundaries and how they have changed over time. This was an opportunity to exhibit a copy of the recently discovered 1601 map of Wells in Lambeth Palace library's collection and we are very grateful to the Library for their permission to include a copy of this map. Bishop Savaric's charter was also exhibited, showing an early written description of the boundary of Wells. Wells City Archives is very grateful for the support of museum volunteers Jan Whittaker and Val Longman for supervising the display of the charter and for providing visitors with guidance.

Emma Houston has continued with work started in 2024 to improve the description of the community collections. There has been considerable progress with this in 2025, and it has allowed for better storage and access to items included in this collection. Austin Little is also working on combining his already comprehensive description of the Petty

Sessions collection with information sourced from outside Wells City Archives. Wells City Archives is particularly grateful to Austin, Emma and Eloise for their contribution this year. Without their help, Wells City Archives would not have been able to offer the same quality of exhibitions or assistance to researchers or visitors.

Wells City Archives is very grateful to the offers of donations in 2025. We have received items that contribute to the city's built heritage and social history that will be of great benefit to future researchers. The support received from donations, the time and expertise of volunteers, and information shared with us by researchers and visitors from Wells and further afield, is very much appreciated and has been indispensable for the progress made this year. Wells City Archives is, as always, very grateful for the support received by everyone at Wells & Mendip Museum, whose knowledge and expertise has been invaluable.

Jonathan Chivers, Archives Manager

Website and Social Media

The museum's social media programme continues to be invaluable in providing interesting content for our supporters and maintaining the profile of the museum. Visits to the website are down on recent years, but followers of our Facebook and Instagram accounts continue to grow.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Website visitors	5,601	8,374	8,712	9,945		10,931	9,511
Facebook followers	630	935	1,696	2,018	2,059	2,193	2,234
Instagram followers	230	880	1,129	1,228	1,375	1,478	1,647

Building, Garden, and Shop

In May a condition survey of the museum building was carried out by Emma Green of Architects Benjamin and Beauchamp, which was a prerequisite for a bid to the Museum Estate and Development Fund (MEND). In July, an accessibility audit was carried out by Disability Inc. funded by a grant from South West Museum Development (SWMD).

Many areas of the museum received attention by the Building Maintenance team during this period, including refurbishment of the Jean Imray Room, and redecorating the West Wing Attic Stairwell, and replacing the defective lighting in the three Statuary cases in the stairwell. We are very grateful for their skilled work. Contractors Ellis & Co. and Holywell Glass repaired the stained glass window and frame in the Exhibition Gallery.

A successful Garden Open Day and plant sale was held in June, and the garden team maintained the garden to a very high standard throughout the year.

Shop sales continued at a steady pace, with cards and books being consistently popular.

Sustainability

Trustee Hannah Bennett attended a SWMD carbon literacy webinar in February, and the feasibility of installing solar panels on the stores complex roof was investigated as part of a MEND application.

Outreach and Collaborative Working

We continue to support our partner organisation Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society with their programme of winter talks and summer excursions. Particularly notable was the talk in April by Tony Coverdale of the Saltford Brass Mill Project 'Red Gold of Africa: Benin, Brass, Bristol and Slavery', held with another organisation we support, Wells and Transatlantic Slavery: Histories, Perspectives and Legacies.

In May a small group from the museum enjoyed a visit to Salisbury Museum. We were welcomed by their operations manager and held an informative question and answer session with her.

In September for Heritage Open Days we participated in a joint event 'The Splendid Stones of Wells' with Wells Cathedral and St Cuthbert's Church to celebrate the stonemasons and their carvings for which the city is famous.

For Remembrance in November we published on our website Peter Trueman's article on St Cuthbert's Church World War Two Roll of Honour lists.

In November the museum staffed a stand at 'Mendip Connections' organised by Mendip Hills National Landscape team at Shiphэм Village Hall.

Marketing and Tourism

With funds from the Search & Learn project we produced a leaflet advertising the hire of the Lecture Hall, Walled Garden, The Jean Imray Room, & Exhibition Room.

We recognise the importance of a digital presence for the city and the county, and support Visit Wells digital marketing and have continued to participate in the Museums in Somerset / Visit Somerset project 'Promoting our Museums with Visit Somerset'.

We have always recognised the importance of heritage to the local economy, and following research by MDSW it is now possible to quantify the economic impact of our visitors locally. For Wells & Mendip Museum, the total economic Impact of **24,305 visitors** to the local economy was **£552,871** (source: MDSW).

Finance

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from the Mendip Cave Registry & Archive, National Lottery Heritage Fund, South West Museum Development, Wells City Council, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society, Andrew Bond, Peter Burr, the Hawkes family, David Limond, Sue Isherwood, and the contributors to the Roman Mendip Crowdfunder.

Through the expertise, determination and teamwork of our fifty plus volunteers we have achieved so much this year, taking advantage of the momentum left to us by the 'Seach & Learn' project. We also received sound advice on various matters from Rachel Bellamy, the Museums Development Officer for Somerset. The Board wishes to record its sincere thanks to all the museum's volunteers and supporters.

David Walker,
Honorary Curator
5th February 2026