

Curator's Report 2020

Governance and Management

The Board currently comprises ten Trustees, see below. Councillor Jenny Rust joined the Board as Wells City Council nominee in November, and Sue Isherwood, previously appointed, is now the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society nominee. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator, and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Philip Porter and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum caretakers.

Andrew Fawcett - Chairperson
Marilyn Cattell - Treasurer
Clare Blackmore
Martin Grass
Sue Isherwood
Richard Lovegrove
Jenny Rust
Philippa Threlfall
Andy Webb
Joseph White

Covid-19

Sadly all activities at the museum were seriously curtailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The museum was closed to the public during the first (late-March to mid-May) and second (November) lockdowns but was able to open for one or two days a week on occasions between. We are most grateful to Richard Lovegrove, the maintenance team and the staff for making the building Covid-secure and to the Front of House volunteers for staffing the museum when we were able to open.

Exhibitions, Events and Activities

Regrettably Janet Rogers stood down as Volunteer Co-ordinator part way through the year and we are most grateful for her work over the years helping to organise events and activities. The exhibitions programme suffered on account of the pandemic, but we are grateful to Christine Fewer for her work on this.

Throughout most of the year Simon Latham's *Lord of the Dance* exhibition was on display in our first floor Exhibition Room, and *As I See It*, an art exhibition by Brian Luker, was on show in our ground floor Meeting Room.

Thanks are due to the maintenance team for preparing City Gallery 2 as a temporary exhibition space. The gallery previously accommodated *Wells Remembers 1914-1918* and the changes have not only provided a new exhibition space but also allowed the room itself to be appreciated.

We are most grateful to Clare Blackmore, Hilary Walters and others for remounting *Portraits*, images from the Phillips City Photographic Studio collection of glass plate negatives as the first exhibition in this new space. The focus of this exhibition is on children, with a display of toys from the museum archive, teenagers, the trades of Wells and the district, builders, bakers, masons, carpenters, servants and domestics,

publicans, travellers, and wedding pictures. The exhibition also features some of the stories uncovered by researching the people behind the portraits.

In March we hosted the inaugural meeting of the Mendip Area Community Archaeology Forum, with support from the Mendip Hills Community Fund. The meeting was most productive with an introduction by Theresa Hall, short presentations by local community archaeology groups, and a keynote presentation by Jody Lewis.

With the museum closed, we immediately prioritised our digital output to engage with our audiences, and we are particularly grateful to Joe White our 'Webmaster', and Helena Field for her expertise in maximising our social media content. There have been several online projects of note:

- Celebrating Somerset - Somerset Day, 11th May
- Online exhibitions on the website: <https://www.wellsmuseum.org.uk/virtual-exhibitions>
- The War Memorial Project (link above).

To deliver these works required a huge amount of time and expertise and we are most grateful to everybody who has contributed.

In September the Marcus Aurelius & Lucius Versus Roman ingot found at Westbury-sub-Mendip in 2016 was put on display, on loan from South West Heritage Trust.

Search & Learn

In March we heard that the museum had been awarded £194,600 by the National Lottery Heritage Fund for the *Search & Learn* project. Unfortunately due to Covid-19 we do not have permission to start, and work is continuing to reshape the project for the future.

Learning

In October the Learning group lead by Hilary Walters met to catch up and review progress. Hilary is in touch with local schools as to their needs and work continues to develop our formal learning offer. In support of the online learning increasingly being used by schools we now have a brilliant short film created by Steve Tofts in support our reopening. To view just search for *Welcome to Wells & Mendip Museum* on YouTube, or visit our website: wellsmuseum.org.uk/your-visit

Collections

This year 50 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. 13 of these were newly acquired material, and 37 were items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

The Hon. Librarian's report follows but we would like to highlight two significant gifts that add to the library's significance as a subject specialist resource. We are most grateful to Stuart Andrews for his donation of books and papers relating to Samuel Taylor Coleridge to establish a special Coleridge section of the library. In August the Old Deanery Garden Project group agreed to donate their book collection relating to William

Turner, the 16th century Dean of Wells. He was physician, herbalist, and ‘the father of English botany’.

Documentation and Research

We are grateful to the Collections team Joan Goddard, Michael Balch, Richard Kilroy, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts for their sterling efforts, as well as David Dawson, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group, for working on the collections before Covid-19 and between lockdowns.

Work by Clare Blackmore, Hilary Walters, Peter Jaggard of the Friends of Mendip Hospital Cemetery, and others in preparation for the forthcoming Somerset and Bath County Lunatic Asylum Exhibition is adding greatly to our knowledge of the history of the Mendip Hospital. The exhibition is scheduled for the Summer of 2021.

During the Summer we worked with Art UK for them to publish images of carvings and plaster casts in the museum’s Statuary display online. Art UK is the Public Catalogue Foundation’s initiative to make images of works in public collections available online and we are pleased that the Statuary carvings, casts and other museum carvings will be made accessible in this way.

Library

There have been no changes in Library staff during the year, but the Library has not been open to the public since the Spring. Between full lockdowns, Library staff with particular projects in hand have had access on Mondays and Tuesdays. This is an account of what has been achieved behind closed doors.

1. In the Library itself

- the jammed sash window has been freed
- the windows and shutters have been painted both inside and out
- thanks to the generosity of WNHAS we have achieved the much-needed replacement of the computer and printer by a high-spec lap-top, proper anti-virus security and a brand-new printer
- Katy Stenhouse and Andrew Haymes have been instructed in use of the new computer by Jon Chivers, who also selected the equipment and transferred the data
- the corner of the room has been reconfigured with a table-top and cupboard and with a small second table for the printer
- the unsightly random collection of box files for the Reid archive has been replaced by a standard set of matching files. The contents are being checked and reviewed by Katy Stenhouse.

2. Transformation of the Attic Stack

Throughout my 16 years as Librarian, the Attic has acted as an overflow from the Library of unbound periodicals, duplicates of titles held in the Library together with rarely consulted titles (such as Folklore), and historic newspapers that supplement the Library collection. The archives include the newly lodged Turner Book Collection re-housed from the Old Deanery and the newly created Coleridge Archive comprising books and journals gifted by the Librarian, in what is hoped to be a growing collection of manuscript copies or conference papers lodged by other

Coleridge scholars. Meanwhile the rearrangement of the Attic – thanks to the energy and imagination of Andrew Haymes and Tomine Nichol – includes the following:

- clearing the inner room of the collection of mannequins and the tidying up of shelf containing Bristol Reference Library's post-1985 catalogue
- provision of two worktables (one with a view of the garden!) for staff use when sorting through books, periodicals and archival material
- re-hanging the door to improve entry to the main attic
- new shelves for arranging periodicals/journals in a more logical sequence
- 9 journals are being content-indexed, plus 9 boxes of Civic Society Archive.

3. Acquisitions in 2020

Apart from the new archives already mentioned above, when the museum reopens bibliographical lists – of new books, pamphlets and additions to our collection of historic newspapers – will be available in the Library or on application to the Librarian at s.andrews123@btinternet.com.

Stuart Andrews, Hon. Librarian

Wells City Archives

Considerably less was achieved during 2020 because of the impact of coronavirus.

On Government advice to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Wells City Archives has been closed to the public since 17th March 2020. It is not yet known when it will be possible to re-open the Archives to visits by the public. The Archivist is planning a safe re-opening.

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, she is solely a part-time employee of the Council. She will still be working at both the museum and the Town Hall.

The Archivist has been working from home but only for part of the period since 17th March. The rest of the time she has been on furlough, apart from 28th September to 4th November, when she was able to come in to work. When she was working from home, she focussed on two areas: email enquiries and the creation of the first proper Archival catalogue of the City Archives collection. She also received several donations of material at home, which she quarantined, then accessioned and listed. During her month back in the museum and Town Hall, the Archivist audited the physical condition of the key items in the historic collection. Since she was furloughed again on 5th November, email enquiries have not been responded to other than by an automatic message explaining that she is on furlough. The Archivist is extremely grateful to the Curator for keeping a regular check on the environmental conditions in and security of the museum Strong Room while she has been at home.

Work has taken place on two exciting voluntary projects during 2020. Firstly, work on "ScraseBase" has continued. This is the vast database of Wells property histories which will eventually be released online. Some excellent news is that at beginning of the year, Archives volunteers Austin Little and Clare Blackmore completed Stage 1 of creating

ScraseBase. Many thanks are given to them for this momentous achievement. Austin then embarked on Stage 2 of the project. This comprises reviewing the database to ensure that consistent standards have been applied throughout, to deal with queries, and to remove transcription errors.

Secondly, the Archivist has collaborated on a voluntary basis on a joint museum/Archives project to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two. She has helped Peter Trueman (who led the project) research a biography of each of the 39 Wells men and women who died during World War Two and are named on Wells War Memorial. We managed to track down photos of 17 of them. The findings were posted from VJ-Day (15th August) onwards on the museum's social media and (in longer form) on its website, and met a most positive response. Remembrance Day 2020 saw the release of the research on the museum's website as an online exhibition. Invaluable contributions to the project were made by members of the community and by Joe White, who brought to it his technical wizardry. The Archivist promoted the project with the local press, who have given it good coverage, and Peter was interviewed about it on BBC Radio Somerset in December.

Finally, during 2020 Sarah Villiers published her local history book entitled *A Street through Time, 1770-2020*, which focusses on St Cuthbert Street. Sarah made considerable use of sources in the City Archives, and also included illustrations featuring Archives documents. This all helps promote the Archives collection.

Dr Julia Wood, Wells City Archivist

Website and Social Media

The museum continues to develop its use of social media to promote its activities and develop audiences, something that we prioritised once Covid-19 struck. We managed to increase Instagram posts to one each day with thanks to Helena Field, and with thanks to Joe White we were able to publish a series of virtual exhibitions on the website.

	2019	2020
Website visitors	5601	8374
Facebook followers	630	935
Instagram followers	230	880

Building, Garden, and Shop

We are grateful to the maintenance team for the work mentioned earlier to make the building Covid-secure for reopening. They have also carried out numerous other repair and maintenance tasks, from clearing roof voids for insulation to be laid to repainting the front door. Just before Christmas they began cleaning and redecorating the Statuary, something that had not been done since it was created in 1995.

We are also most grateful to the gardens team, in particular Norman and Marianne Adams who have been working tirelessly to develop the outside spaces which we anticipate will play an important part in our recovery from the pandemic.

When we have been open takings from the Shop have been significant and thanks are due to our shop manager Sue Marley for her work in difficult circumstances.

Outreach and Collaborative Working

Throughout the year outreach and collaborative working suffered due to Covid-19 with many initiatives cancelled, including meetings by the Young Archaeologists' Club. YAC is in many ways so important to the museum, introducing new generations to museums and archaeology, and we sincerely hope to resume meetings as soon as possible.

The museum has continued to work with the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, and the Bishop's Barn as Wells Heritage Partners to co-ordinate and complement heritage activities throughout the city, including support for Visit Wells.

Marketing and Tourism

The museum is involved in the *Supporting our Museums with Visit Somerset* project, in recognition of the importance of online presence post-Covid. We are most grateful to Helena, Joe, and Jon Chivers for their contributions to this.

Finance

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from Wells City Council, Richard Green, Guy Belshaw (Fairground Heritage Trust), Mendip District Council, the National Lottery Heritage Emergency Fund, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society, Somerset County Council Chairman's Fund, the Old Deanery Garden Project Group, and the Wells Lodge of the Freemasons. The museum is also most grateful to everyone who donated to our emergency Covid-19 Crowdfunder campaign and many other individual contributors who supported the museum during this difficult time.

2020 has been a most challenging year, but we have managed to achieve a lot through the expertise, determination and teamwork of our sixty plus volunteers. The Board wishes to record its sincere thanks to them all.

David Walker,
Honorary Curator