

Welcome to Wells & Mendip Museum's newsletter with information about exhibitions, talks, events and developments at the Museum. If you would like to receive a copy by e-mail please contact admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk

Opening hours: The museum is currently closed.

Commencing 9th January, the museum will be open 10am – 4pm on Saturdays only, until further notice.

LOCKDOWN

After the first lockdown in March, we were determined to open the museum to the public as soon as we were allowed, so at the end of August, once the building had been declared “covid-secure, we began to open just on Saturdays. We were of course then hit with a second lockdown, but again were adamant that we would try to open again before Christmas, which we did albeit for just 2 days,, and are pleased to say that we had a steady stream of visitors and achieved excellent sales in the shop on both days. Many of our visitors expressed their pleasure in finding the museum open and we received many compliments concerning our exhibits, particularly the Phillips Photos exhibition in the newly refurbished 'Wells Gallery II'.

EXHIBITIONS

Even though we have been unable to run our full planned programme of exhibitions in the museum this year, there are still many wonderful virtual exhibitions for you to visit and enjoy on our website, including “**The Mendip Hills**” – a selection of short films by The Mendip Society, “**Echo**” – an exhibition of painting, photography and print by Thea, Arran & Philip Willcocks and “**Scenes from the Mountains**” – an art exhibition by Joeby Slight. Just go to www.wellsmuseum.org.uk and click on “What's On”

**PREVIEW OF A VERY EXCITING EXHIBITION TO BE HELD AT THE MUSEUM
JUNE 2021**

**THE SOMERSET AND BATH LUNATIC ASYLUM 1848-1918
A PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION.**

Discover the stories of patients and staff through photographs, artefacts and displays.

In a quiet corner of Wells there is the last resting place of over 3,000 patients and staff from the Somerset and Bath County Lunatic Asylum which was established in 1848. Their graves are not marked with headstones but with simple iron markers with numbers on them.

The plot itself, purchased in 1873 and last used in 1963, is quiet, peaceful and has a deep feeling of respect for many of these forgotten people. The grounds are a haven for wildlife and old stumps of trees blown down in a storm in 2008 have been beautifully carved into

angels and figures which pay homage to many of the residents troubled lives by chainsaw artist Peter Bolton.

There is a small, plain Victorian Chapel and it is a gem outside the medieval buildings of Wells perched on the hill overlooking the grandeur of the city with its impressive streets and buildings.

The cemetery is managed by the Friends of the Mendip Hospital, who saved it from development when it was put up for sale by the NHS in 2000. The Friends are all volunteers, who dedicate themselves to preserving this wonderful space and researching the stories and histories of some of the many thousands of patients who lived at the hospital.

Part of the archive of the Asylum is a collection of photographs of the patients which have been kept along with their medical records and provide a unique insight into this institution.

The Wells and Mendip Museum in their Philips Portraits Collection have many portraits of the staff who worked at the Asylum and cared for the patients, and together with The Friends of the Hospital, are combining to stage an exhibition, so that for the first time the photographs, stories of their sitters and an insight into the life, running and the work of the hospital from its opening in 1848 to 1918.

The hospital employed many hundreds of local residents and was an important focus in the community for over 150 years.



Find out more about Jane Jones who was admitted to the Asylum in 1848 and died there 64 years later in 1913.

Mary Ann Norman who spent the eighty years of her life either at the Wells Union Workhouse, Shepton Mallet Prison or the Asylum and who was arrested in Wells over 30 times for being drunk and disorderly and for attacking a policeman in the Market Place with a tea pot.

Roderick Maclean who was admitted to the Wells Asylum as a "hopeless lunatic with homicidal mania thinking that all the people in England were against him and having the feeling that he should like to injure someone" and who, after his release, travelled up to Windsor in March 1882 and attempted to assassinate Queen Victoria by shooting her with a

pistol and who was charged with High Treason and committed to Broadmoor as insane where he died in 1921 or Eliza Porter who entered the Asylum with a broken heart after a sad love affair but who recovered and released to find love again.

Each patient has their own unique story and many of these will be told when the exhibition opens.

NEWS FROM THE WELLS CITY ARCHIVES

This Remembrance Day saw the release on the Museum's website of an online exhibition which has been created specially to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the end of the

Second World War. It remembers the sons and daughters of Wells who died during that war and who are named on the Wells War Memorial. The exhibition can be found at :- <https://www.wellsmuseum.org.uk/wells-war-memorial-project>.

Wells & Mendip Museum and Wells City Archives have jointly produced this exhibition, along with technical wizardry from Museum Trustee Joe White and invaluable contributions from members of the community. We have had a wonderful response from relatives and friends of the 39 Wells servicemen and women who died, and offer our thanks to all those who have contributed to the project.

One of our hopes was that we could track down photographs of as many as possible of the 39 men and women before it was too late - as it largely was when the Museum produced the First World War book. We are delighted that we have managed to trace photos of 17 of them.



Photograph courtesy of Elaine Watson, Albert's granddaughter

Peter Trueman, who led the project, will be interviewed about it on BBC Radio Somerset later this month.

Wells City Archives remains closed to the public because of the pandemic but is planning a safe reopening. The date of this will be publicised nearer the time. We are afraid we cannot respond to queries at present, but this will be possible from January, when I return to work following a period of furlough.

Many thanks for your understanding. **Julia Wood, Wells City Archivist**

MUSEUM LIBRARY

Lockdown has delayed the inauguration of the Coleridge Archive containing books on Coleridge from my personal collection, with articles and conference papers from myself and other Coleridge scholars and long runs of the *Coleridge Bulletin* and the *Wordsworth Circle*. We hope to provide an exhibition of some of the material in the collection as our first display on re-opening.

Meanwhile we have received additional historic newspapers for our growing collection, including *The Ladysmith Lyre* that was published in the beleaguered town during the siege of Ladysmith in the Boer War.

On a less dramatic but nevertheless important note, Katy Stonehouse has been reorganizing the Reid Archive in more uniform and becoming box files.

Stuart Andrews, Hon. Librarian

FROM THE CURATOR

This year has been difficult and challenging for all of us, for many unbelievably so. What is clear though, is the amazing levels of goodwill and support for the museum and how it benefits the heritage of Wells, Mendip, and our local communities. There will be time enough later to review the year, but this newsletter is an opportunity to share doing with our friends, stakeholders and partners some of what we have been doing.

With the museum closed for long periods and room hire unfeasible, we were denied our usual sources of income. However, through the generosity of our supporters and emergency grant aid we have been able to pay our bills. We are so grateful to the many individuals, the National Lottery Heritage Emergency Fund, Mendip District Council, and the Government measures that have allowed us to pay our bills.

Covid-secure work on the collections has still been possible this year, although at a slower pace. We have continued to accept material for the collections, 13 new items or groups of items compared with 32 in 2019. We have also made progress with improving the displays such as the new temporary exhibition space to replace the World War One exhibition. An exciting development is the improved availability of DNA analysis, and we have been working with several researchers to find out more about the early human and archaic horse material in the collections. As soon as results are available, we will share them with you.



A new accession, a fob watch presented to H.E. Balch on his retirement as Postmaster of Wells 1931



ed anyway to develop our social media presence. It has proved invaluable during lockdowns, engaging with our friends and supporters and letting new audiences know about the museum.

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

Of particular note is the World War Two project to tell the stories of those named on the Wells War Memorial. It was so helpful that it was available on-line for Remembrance when meeting up in person was restricted.

A heartfelt thankyou to everybody who has been so helpful to the museum in any way and let us sincerely hope for a better year to come.

BUILDING WORK IN THE MUSEUM

While carefully observing the social distancing regulations, our maintenance team have been taking full advantage of the restricted public opening times of the museum to carry out major renovation and redecoration works.



Scaffolding platforms were set up to access the walls adjacent to the main staircase and landing which allowed us to clean the statuary mounted high up on the wall above the stairwell. It also gave us a golden opportunity to redecorate, as we felt the existing maroon



paintwork was very tired and that it was high time for a change. The maroon on the north elevation has been retained to tone in with a steel grey we have used on the other elevations. We think the result is stunning and hope you will agree.

MUSEUM GARDENS



Despite the lockdown, we have been fortunate in that our gardening team have been able to continue their work unabated. The complete transformation of the terracing

to date, seen: the erection of a gated composting area, the creation of new raised beds which have now been planted out, the preparation of the areas where new seating will be placed and the laying out of the pathway/access areas.

In the front garden, we have reconfigured the grass area by adding more turf and have laid out a new bed parallel to the path to the front door. We are very grateful to the Old Deanery Gardening Group who have funded a great deal of this work.

FACEBOOK & INSTAGRAM

Even though the museum has been closed, there have still been great articles and photos being posted every day on both our Facebook and Instagram pages. If you have either of these accounts, we would love you to "like" and "share" our posts so that they may reach a much wider audience. If you do not have either of these accounts, you can still enjoy these daily posts via the links at the bottom of the "Join & Support" page on our website.



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THANK YOU

This has been an incredibly difficult year for everyone, but we look forward to being able to welcome everyone back very soon.

In the meantime, we would like to thank our wonderful volunteers who have worked so hard and given their time to keep the museum going. We would also like to thank everyone for their donations and continued support during these trying times



We wish all of you a very Happy Christmas and a Peaceful New Year with the hope that 2021 brings a better year for all of us.

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