

Wells & Mendip Museum

Curator's Report January - December 2024

Governance and Management

The museum is in the final stages of transferring governance from the old Trust to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). A constitution for the new CIO has been agreed and accepted by the Charity Commission. The board of the new CIO comprises eight members (Sue Isherwood - Chairperson, Marilyn Cattell – Treasurer, Lynda Armstrong, Tim Ritchie, Mark Wakelin-Gilden, Tanya Tyreman, Jane Burman, and Paul Wiltshire). Crystal Johnson has agreed to join the new board as the Dean & Chapter nominee.

Five members of the old Trust board remain until it can be terminated (Sue Isherwood, Marilyn Cattell, Hannah Bennett, Richard Lovegrove, and Philippa Threlfall). During the year Andy Webb and Georgie Robbins resigned as trustees of the old board.

David Walker continues as Honorary Curator and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Richard Stephens and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum Caretakers, with Natalie Fewer as Cleaner and part-time FOH Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Search & Learn project

The museum's *Search & Learn* project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) has again been the museum's top priority during this period, bringing additional resources and capacity to our programmes as well as capital funding to refurbish spaces within the museum building. The formal opening of the Balch's Study and the new Wells City Galleries took place on 14th March, with historian Tony Scrase cutting the ribbon.

Project Manager Victoria Northwood has continued to ably manage and implement the project's activity plan, and in August Collections Manager Matt Williams completed his contract to digitise the Phillips portraits glass plate negatives. He and a small group of volunteers digitised 2,382 glass plate negatives, primarily Phillips portraits, repackaged them and updated their storage locations.

In early 2024 the museum hosted a second round of *Get to Know Your Museum*, a programme which encouraged individuals to explore the museum and its collections in partnership with a museum volunteer mentor, supported by the Curator and artist Jan Ollis.

Within These Walls was an exhibition conceived and prepared by the museum's team of Garden volunteers which was on display during March and April.

Partnership work with Somerset Film also continued during this period, and two new films were commissioned, on the subjects of Wells Carnival and mental healthcare in Wells.

Between February and May we host the major exhibition *Smashed in the Cellar*, guest curated by Vicky Dawson. It explored the stories behind a remarkable collection of 500 years of pottery that was excavated from the museum garden in the 1990s. The collection included everything from 14th century wine jugs to exotic Chinese export porcelain and a full range of sanitary ware, including a rare late 18th century flushing toilet! The show also featured the major painting *The Tea Party* by Richard Collins, on loan from The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London. This was funded by Arts

Council England with thanks to Vicky Dawson for making the application. A condition of the loan was that it be stewarded and 25 plus people new to the museum were recruited for this, some of whom have subsequently volunteered in other roles. Local artist Duncan Cameron worked on a contemporary response to the collection and his original artwork was included in the exhibition. As well as creating his own work inspired by the pottery, Duncan led workshops with clients and members of The Lawrence Centre and Heads Up in Wells. Participants' works were also on show at the museum. A family workshop was run with a story teller Jane Flood during the Easter holiday period.

Out of Time: Underground Mendip was a major exhibition guest curated by Josephine Lanyon, which ran between July and September. It connected early twentieth-century quests for archaeological and geological knowledge with our current environmental concerns. The exhibition intertwined the pioneering works of Herbert Balch, John Hassall, and Harry Savory, who unravelled the mysteries of Mendip caves, with new contemporary works by Ben Rivers and Emma Stibbon, inspiring us to imagine the future of this subterranean world. At the heart of the exhibition was a series of black and white pen and ink drawings by the museum's founder, Herbert E Balch. His drawings from the 1900s, shown for the first time in this exhibition, resulted from a relentless investigation into how the caves have been formed and used by humans for 45,000 years. The documents have an urgency and directness that reflect hours of physical endeavour to pioneer the discovery of Swildon's Hole, Priddy (1901), Eastwater Cavern, Wells (1902) and Wookey Hole (1906). The 1914 publication *Wookey Hole: its Cave and Cave Dwellers* was the culmination of years of research by Herbert Balch in collaboration with the photographer Harry Savory and the graphic artist John Hassall; this book was displayed alongside examples of the three artists' work, geological specimens, and ambrotype glass plates. Emma participated in a conversation event with contemporary painter of cave exploration Robin Gray in August, and in September Ben and Emma took part in an illustrated panel discussion.

Both guest curated exhibitions generated a lot of interest.

The museum also hosted a six week practical art course *Time & Place: Collect, Care, Value*, delivered by artist Sara Dudman supported by the Curator which focussed on some of the approaches towards conservation, restoration and preservation of objects in our care. The works of the participants were displayed throughout the museum.

Exhibitions and Activities

In addition to the NLHF supported programme, the museum held a full schedule of other exhibitions and events, including Geoff Dixon's models exhibition in February, Chris Mottram's art in April, works by Draycott Art Group in May, paintings by Robin Gray in September, photographs by Jack Hardin in September, art by the Wells Art Group in October, works by the Somerset Printmakers in October, and paintings by Michael Brobson in December.

During July and August we hosted *The Italians of Wells*, an exhibition curated by members of the strong local Italian community, many being descendants of Italians detained as prisoners of war in Wells during World War Two. With particular thanks to Julie Bollini and Mark Wakelin-Gilden.

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

Learning

Learning consultant Katherine Webber has refined her proposals following a survey of teachers in local primary schools and a teacher preview evening held in May. The themes to be focused on have now been confirmed as follows:

- Herbert Balch (loans / activity box and museum trail)
- Transport Through Time (loans / activity box and gallery trail)
- Wells at War (loans / activity box)
- Art and design (gallery trail)
- Ice Age to Iron Age

Katherine also discussed a further Map Skills activity with the City Archives Manager in response to feedback received from teachers, and is maintaining contact with the Learning Manager at Wells Cathedral regarding the ongoing delivery of learning activities around Wells and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Collections

During this period 59 items, or groups of items, were accessioned into the collections. 32 of these were newly acquired material, and 27 were items, or groups of items, already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

Conservation

NLHF funding from Search & Learn has enabled conservation of the Tudway Parham Plantation map by South West Heritage Trust. The map is a key learning resource for the Wells and Transatlantic Slavery learning activity.

Documentation & Research

Work documenting the collections has continued, and we are grateful to the collections team Joan Goddard, Richard Kilroy, Allen Cotton, Gabriella Cole, Steve Tofts, and Pete Missingham.

Of particular interest are several large collections of mainly freshwater and marine shells. Some, especially those from the collection of Dr Henry Livett, were accurately identified and labelled and required minimal intervention. Others had also been identified by another enthusiast, Brig E A Glennie.

There are currently 33,175 (records in the museum 'database', an increase of 399 during the year. Work continues both adding new records, and also rationalising duplicate records. The work by S&L Collections Manager Matt Williams and volunteers to digitise glass plate negatives is described under the *Search & Learn* heading.

We are also grateful to David Dawson, Vicky Dawson, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group for working on the Wells Museum Garden pottery material.

A working group was established to develop content for the 'Roman Mendip' displays planned for the ground floor 'corridor' which leads to Balch's Study and the Balch Room.

A significant academic paper was published on material in the museum collections from Charterhouse Warren Farm Shaft, a cave near Charterhouse Warren on Mendip. During the 1970s the remains of at least 37 men, women and children were found buried together in. Many of the bones showed butchery cut marks typical of cannibalism. The remains were originally discovered by cavers hoping to dig into new cave. This is one of the most extraordinary cave archaeology sites in the UK. We will never know what happened all those years ago, but new techniques like archaic DNA analysis can tell us a lot about these individuals and their society. These finds have been investigated for a number of years by researchers at Oxford University and the Crick Institute, and the paper summarises their findings: Schulting, R. *et al.* 'The darker angels of our nature': Early Bronze Age butchered human remains from Charterhouse Warren, Somerset, UK. *Antiquity*, 16 December 2024

<https://www.cambridge.org/.../93EBB135C857C7B7992FC80A4ED...>

Library

1. Library Assistants

- (a) Michael Brooks: Friday afternoon
- (b) Nicolas Brown: combines personal studies with 3 Library sessions
- (c) Keith Cattell: Thursday morning
- (d) Andrew Haymes: Tuesday morning; responsible for the Attic content
- (e) Katy Stenhouse: manages online content; Library session once a month
- (f) Mary Sturmer: newly joined; past library experience

Sadly, Ruth Pascoe, who completed the typed lists of all the Library's Somerset and Wells boxes while already suffering ill health, died in the Autumn. She had been much liked by the Library team and by those who met her in other parts of the museum.

2. New titles in 2024

- (a) Nos 1401-1426 are shown in the first Library Newsletter of 2025
- (b) The latest editions to the Coleridge Archive:
 - Letters of Charles Lamb*
 - John & Clare MacDonald, *The Endeavour Journals: Captain Cook* (2024)
 - Basil Willey, *Coleridge* (1972)
 - Stuart Andrews, *Robert Southey: History, Politics, Religion* (2011)

3. Removed Bristol volumes to the Attic

- XXVII *The Records of a Church in Bristol 1640-1687*
- XXXII *The Great White Book of Bristol*
- XXXIII *Callendar of the Bristol Apprentice Book 1532-1565*
- XXXIV *Accounts of the Constables of Bristol Castle*
- XXXVII A *Bristol Miscellany*
- XL *Bristol Gaol Delivery 1741-1799*
- XLI *The Ordinances 1506-1598*
- XLIII *Calendar of the Bristol Apprentice Book Part III 1552-1565*
- XLVI *The Pre Reformation Records of All Saints Bristol Part I*
- XLVIII *The Topographic of Medieval & Early Modern Bristol Part I*
- XLIX *The Golden Family: A Bristol Merchant Dynasty*

- Vol. 50 *The Municipal Government of Bristol* 1851-1901
- Vol. 54 *Bristol Probate Inventories* Part 1 1542-1650
- Vol. 57 *Bristol Probate Inventories* 1657-1689
- Vol. 58 *Robert Sturmy's Commercial Expedition: Genoese Trial*
- Vol. 60 *Bristol Probate Inventories* Part III 1690-1804
- Vol. 63 *The Ledger Thomas Speel*: 1681-1690
- Vol. 68 *Earl of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century* Ed. K. Hepgood
- Vol. 70 *The Bristol Hearth Tax*: 1662-1673 Many Editors
- Vol. 72 *The Bristol Poll Booth for 1852*: Ed. John Stephens

4. From 25 selected Bristol volumes kept on Library shelf

- XV 1949 *Records of Bristol Ships* 1800-1838
- XXXI 1979 *The Overseas Trade of Bristol: 16th Century*
- XXXVI 1984 *The Port of Bristol* 1843-1884
- XXXVIII 1986 *Bristol, Africa & the Slave Trade* Vol 1 & 2, 1730-1745
- XLVII 1991 *Bristol, Africa & the Slave Trade* Vol 3 & 4, 1746-1807
- 52 2000 *St Michael Hill* University of Bristol
- 65 2013 *Clifton College: Foundation to Evacuation*
- 71 2019 *Bristol University: Conception to Foundation*
- 73 2020 *Orphans, Widows, Guardians* 1353-1594

Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian

Wells City Archives

It has been another busy year for Wells City Archives with increasing numbers of enquires. Progress has been made with a number of projects, such as improvements to previous listings that make use of current technology. This is thanks to the valuable time given by volunteers to these projects. Wells City Archives also participated in Heritage Open Days in September bringing a collection of original documents to Wells Town Hall, some of these in protective pockets, which allowed for the original items to be handled by visitors.

The number of enquires to Wells City Archives has continued to rise. There was a 23% increase in enquires this year compared to the previous year, with subjects including the old names of renamed streets, information about the city's pubs and inns, prisoners of war camps, unusual pavement markings, as well as research into the history of houses and family members in Wells. Most enquires were from the U.K, however enquiries were received from Italy, France, U.S.A. Australia, and elsewhere. Wells City Archives hosted visits by researchers wishing to consult the original documents, and there have been a few tours of the archives, showing some of the key items in the collection. Temperature and relative humidity conditions have been maintained at recommendations set to best preserve the collection, with regular monitoring to guard against fluctuations in the environment.

Wells City Archives has once again gratefully received the time and expertise of volunteers and they have been working on improvements, such as Austin Little's digital listing of building plans. The listing adds more flexibility to the physical card index, for

instance it is now possible to search this collection by architect, opening up more avenues for potential research. Austin has also worked on expanding the recently completed Petty Sessions database with information from outside of the collection. Wells City Archives is very grateful to Austin's work in 2024 with both projects. Work in producing a database of Tony Scrase's research into the medieval properties of Wells, Scrasebase, continues and Wells City Archives is very grateful to Tony Scrase and Dr Julia Wood for their work on this project in creating what will be a very useful resource.

Wells City Archives is also thankful for the help of Emma Houston for making improvements in the description of the community collections. This has made it possible to provide better storage for these items and will save time for future researchers using the collection. Wells City Archives is also grateful to Eloise Reid for creating a digital backup of information relating to the collection's accessions. This has improved the retrieval of information while adding a contingency in the event of emergency. Emma and Eloise have also assisted in controlling the environment in the archives to ensure the items are kept in recommended conditions. Wells City Archives is very grateful for their contribution this year, which has helped to preserve the collection and to provide useful aids for research purposes in 2025 and onwards.

A small display was created in Wells Town Hall focusing on changing tea drinking habits in Wells, and Wells City Archives also participated in Heritage Open Days 2024 by displaying a temporary pop-up exhibition at Wells Town Hall. The exhibition was entitled 'Courts and Conduits,' and presented a few key items from the collection. Bishop Bekynton's charter of 1451 granting water access was shown and a selection of original petty sessions court documents was displayed under supervision. A reproduction of an 1860 map of Wells was also popular with visitors. Wells City Archives is very grateful to Wells & Mendip Museum's support with this display, and to Christine Armstrong, Richard Kilroy, Austin Little, Val Longman, Ruth Pascoe and Jan Whittaker who all volunteered their time. Wells City Archives is very grateful to them for making the exhibition possible.

Finally, we would like to thank all of those who provided donations to the Wells City Archives in 2024, and the Richard III Society Somerset Branch, who have kindly donated copies of translations of the Richard III and Henry VIII pardons in our collection. This will be available for use by researchers from 2025, and includes background and contextual information that will be really useful. Wells City Archives is once again very grateful to the support it receives, from volunteers contributing valuable time and expertise, to current and former residents of Wells sharing their knowledge, to those kindly donating to the collection. None of the progress achieved this year would have been possible without them.

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. Website, Facebook and Instagram figures all show steady growth.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Website visitors	5,601	8,374	8,712	9,945		10,931

Facebook followers	630	935	1,696	2,018	2,059	2,193
Instagram followers	230	880	1,129	1,228	1,375	1,478

Building, Garden, and Shop

Many areas of the museum received attention by the Building Maintenance team during this period, including decorating Balch's Study, the new Wells City Galleries, and the Curator's office. The Exhibition Room and Recycling Corridor fire doors were refurbished, and contractors replaced guttering and redecorated exterior windows on the Western elevation.

Norman Adams and the garden team created a 'bee hotel', to provide habitats for overwintering pollinator insects and to support biodiversity. A successful Garden Open Day was held in June, and the garden team maintained the garden to a very high standard throughout the year.

Sustainability

Trustees Sue Isherwood and Hannah Bennett undertook Carbon Literacy for Museums course run by the Museum Development South West, and Hannah has subsequently taken a lead with this throughout the year, attending and reporting on carbon literacy and arranging a social media post for Carbon Literacy Action Day, 14th November.

Outreach and Collaborative Working

Wells and Transatlantic Slavery - Histories, Perspectives and Legacies: Throughout the year the museum continued to contribute to this group. In October we hosted a talk by Stephanie Mathivet on Rachel Tudway, who owned a sugar plantation at Parham, Antigua, which was worked by enslaved people during the 18th century.

A small group enjoyed a visit to the Wiltshire Museum at Devizes in June. We were welcomed by their Curator and Staff and learned about their organisation and future plans.

Throughout 2024 we worked with 'Museum to You' a CIC created by Frances Webb and Suzannah Cook to fill the gap between the museum and people whose access was limited. Presentations available during 2024 included *Art & Handycrafts* and *Romans*.

Marketing and Tourism

In 2024 we replaced our A5 flier leaflet with a trifold leaflet, and liaised with the Visit Wells Tourist Information Office at the Town Hall over our activities and exhibitions programme.

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, but this has been difficult to demonstrate, but following research by Museum Development South West it is now possible to quantify the economic impact of our visitors locally:

“In 2023/24, your museum had 23,467 visitors.

Wells and Mendip Museum – Economic Impact of Visitors figures 2023/24: Total Economic Impact of Visitors to the Local Economy: **£540,163**

(source: MDSW annual museum survey)

Finance

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Wells City Council, Wells Freemasons, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society.

Through the expertise, determination and teamwork of our sixty plus volunteers we have achieved so much this year, and through the NLHF grant for *Search & Learn* we have achieved so much more. 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
4th March 2025