

Curator's Report 2019

Governance and Management

The Board currently comprises nine Trustees, see below. David Cottle stood down after over twenty years of service on the Board, and three nominated posts are currently unfilled – the one Dean & Chapter nominee, the one Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society nominee, and the one Wells City Council 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

Philippa Threlfall

Andy Webb

Joseph White

Exhibitions and Activities

Throughout 2019 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. Exhibitors included the Calligraphy & Lettering Arts Society, Anna Dmochowski, Draycott Art group, Somer Inspirations, the Old Bakery Artists, and Annie Davenport. There were also exhibitions by Robin Gray & Ceris Jones, Derek Smart, David Read, Jennie Thomas, Kevin Jones, Wendy Lovegrove & Alan Marchant, and the Society of Disabled Artists. Debbie Richards held a photography display, and there were textile exhibitions from Pam Martin & Hilary Tudgee, the Avalon Embroiderers' Guild, and a show of work by a group who had just successfully completed their City & Guilds embroidery diploma.

In June the Wells and Mendip Astronomers held a very well attended event to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11 and man's first landing on the Moon, and in December we also benefitted from a very successful Christmas Craft Fair. The museum is very grateful to Christine Fewer for arranging this wide-ranging programme.

Several exhibitions related to the museum collections:

In July the Wiltshire artist Julie Smith installed *Cabinet 48* which referenced Zinc ore and Bronze artefacts from the collections. The work was a contribution to Wells Art Contemporary.

In September we held *Portraits*, curated by Clare Blackmore and volunteers Diane Bingham, Hilary Walters and others. The exhibition displayed images from the Phillips City Photographic Studio collection of glass plate negatives in the museum collections, and generated considerable interest.

In October we hosted the *Mills of Wells* an exhibition by the Wells Mills Interest Group that told the story of water mills in the city that for centuries harnessed the power of the St Andrew's stream (see Archives report below).

Search & Learn

In November we submitted a new application to the National Heritage Lottery Fund for *Search & Learn*, our project to work with partners and engage with local communities to refurbish Balch's Study and the first floor Wells Rooms. This reformulated application was the culmination of many months work and we are very grateful to our consultant Melita Armitage for her enthusiasm and expertise. We will know the result of the application in March 2020.

Learning

In January we brought all those involved with learning at the museum to map out the structure of learning activities at the museum. Learning broadly falls into three areas, each with their own disciplines and requirements:

- Formal learning – school visits and activities etc, headed up by our Volunteer Learning Officer
- Family learning – activities for families, intergenerational work, events during school holidays etc, headed up by the museum manager
- Adult learning – Research, talks, seminars, U3A etc, headed up by Eric Galvin.

Unfortunately Donnie Houser stood down as VLO later in the year for family reasons. We are very grateful to Donnie for her contribution to Learning. However we were able to appoint Hilary Walters in her place. Until her retirement Hilary taught at Wookey School and was Early Years / Special Needs Co-ordinator and Deputy Head. She was also involved with Easton Preschool and Bath Spa University.

Collections

This year 73 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. 32 of these were newly acquired material, and 41 were items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

The museum also entered into an agreement with South West Heritage Trust to borrow and display a Roman ingot found at Westbury-sub-Mendip in 2016.

Conservation, Documentation, and Research

Work to reduce light levels in the Geology Gallery and the 'Roman Mendip' area between the Meeting Room and the Balch Room has been carried out by the Buildings Maintenance team.

For the last five years the Collections Working group has been beaver away on our project to update our digital records. They have been updating numbering and descriptions to current standards based on information recorded in registers, notebooks and spreadsheets, and recording the locations of the objects in the galleries and stores. The project officially ended in October and although there is always more

work to be done, the five-year programme has largely achieved what it set out to do.

- The contents of all the boxes (except the Garden Excavation boxes) and all items on the open shelves have been listed, and the details entered onto the database with their locations.
- The Garden Excavation collection is being managed slightly differently in that the contents of all the boxes are being listed first, before adding the entries to the database. The work is being done by the Wells Pottery group and this method works better for them. As all the material came from the Garden there is no additional issues over who gave the items to the museum.
- The contents of most of the gallery display cases and gallery cabinets have been listed and the database updated accordingly.
- Collections in the galleries still to be checked can be completed as part of the *Search & Learn* project when the Wells Rooms are refurbished.
- The database now comprises 29,631 records, an increase of 34% over three years.

We are very grateful to the Collections team Joan Goddard, Michael Balch, Richard Kilroy, Peter Missingham, Joseph White, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts for their sterling efforts, as well as David Dawson, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group.

During the summer Royal Holloway University MSc student Tim Pearson studied the museum's Pleistocene remains originally excavated by Herbert Balch and the Mendip Nature Research Committee. The re-evaluation of the collection will be most useful. 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.

- Staffing
Sarah White has joined the Library team.
- New books/pamphlets acquired
In 2019: 69 (2018: 35). The 2019 figure includes major donations as follows:
(a) 17 titles from Peter James (mainly of Wells Cathedral and sundry bishops)
(b) 18 from the Hilliard Society Library (miniatures, enamels, silhouettes)
(c) 10 as a first instalment of books presented by the Librarian for the proposed Coleridge Archive (see paragraph 7 below).
- Historic Newspapers
The Library's random collection of historic newspapers has been augmented by the addition of several years of the *Illustrated London News* presented by Michael Spicer and a mixed collection of national and provincial newspapers. Although shelved in the Attic Stack, these new collections are inventoried in the Library under four sections: National (general), National (royalty), National (World War 2), Local and Provincial - the historic Library categories.

- **House publications**
Library assistant Eric Preston has expanded his Library Occasional Paper on the history of Wells High Street Shops (2017) into an illustrated booklet sold as a museum publication (2019). About half the print run of 100 is sold.
- **Library Use**
Recorded research sessions (excluding telephone/email enquiries) totalled 92 in 2019 (110 in 2018). The 2019 sessions included an afternoon visit by a three-member team from Loughborough University to research the former Mendip Mental Hospital, for which the Library has records of births, marriages and deaths among the hospital's inmates.
- **Exhibitions**
The summer exhibition illustrating the High Street Shops closed at the end of October. It was followed by the winter exhibition of historic newspapers due to run until Easter 2020. An innovation is a "taster" display case on the ground floor of the museum.
- **New projects embarked on during 2019**
A full inventory of titles in the Attic Stack – duplicates, periodicals, and non-Somerset stock – is in progress.
Following the gifts of pamphlets and other Coleridgean material from David Thompson (formerly of the Coleridge Cottage, Nether Stowey), the Librarian is adding a part of his own Coleridge collection to form a permanent archive.

Wells City Archives

Less was achieved during 2019 because the Archivist was off sick from March until August. Jonathan Chivers did a terrific job as Acting Archivist during the five months she was off, and the Archivist wishes to express her gratitude to him. He responded to enquiries, received visitors, and conducted three tours of the Archives – all in half a day a week.

Outreach events which promoted the City Archives collection and engaged with wider audiences included the Archives' participation in the *Wake Up Wells!* community event on 26th January. In February, the Archivist gave a talk about the collection to Evercreech Local History Society.

In 2018, Wells City Archives had collaborated with the Wells Mills Interest Group to produce (for Heritage Open Day) a new exhibition they had researched and written, called *Mills of Wells*. An extended version of this exhibition ran at the museum from 24th October until 16th November 2019. An impressive total of 1,031 people visited the museum during this period. This gives an indication of how popular the exhibition was (even though we are not sure whether every one of these people viewed the display).

The monthly Archives Reading Room session in the Lecture Hall was in abeyance during the absence of the Archivist but resumed on her return. Four local history books were published during 2019 whose authors had spent much time researching sources in the

City Archives, and all of which included illustrations featuring documents from the Archives. This all helps promote the collection. These books were *A History of Wells City Band* by Sue Caola, *The City Arms – Wells* by Clare Blackmore and David Mather, *Charles Heal and Sons' Big Shows* by Guy Belshaw and Richard Green, and *The Mills of Wells* by Wells Mills Interest Group.

Dr Wood's focus (in addition to responding to enquiries and accommodating readers) has been on the Summary Catalogue, which will be released online once it is complete. As regards the Archives' digitisation projects, development work has continued on ScraseBase, the exciting new database of Wells property histories. It contains data (much from the City Archives) researched and generously shared by historian Tony Scrase. Volunteers Austin Little and Clare Blackmore have been carrying out sterling data entry.

The Archivist acknowledges her gratitude for the invaluable contribution made by Archives volunteers.

Publications

As previously mentioned, the museum published two booklets during 2019, *The Changing Shops of Wells* by Eric Preston, and *The Mills of Wells* by the Wells Mills Interest Group. Six bi-monthly issues of the Museum Newsletter were published and circulated to museum 'Friends', local venues and organisations, and local press.

Website and Social Media

The museum continues to develop its use of social media to promote its activities and develop audiences. Evaluating the statistics is not straight forward but in terms of numbers we currently have about 5,000 annual visits to the website, about 630 followers on Facebook (c.470 in 2018), about 217 followers on Twitter (c.201 in 2018), and about 230 followers on Instagram.

Building, Garden, and Shop

During the year grant from Viridor Credits has funded the professional repair and redecoration of exterior windows of the Grade 2 listed building. Working with Richard Lovegrove the Building Maintenance team has continued to provide first class care of the building, this year in particular redecoration of many interior spaces, including interior painting of the Library and freeing the sash windows – a boon in summer! stalwarts of the Building Maintenance team are Ruth Angelinetta, Mick Bush, Andrew Haymes, Richard Ivens, Alan McCartney, Tomine Nicol, and Roy Yates.

Considerable progress has been made in the Garden team under Lynne Smith and Joseph White. They have been joined by Marianne and Norman Adams and supported by the Buildings team. Drainage has been improved along the front elevation of the building and the front lawn re-seeded, and work begun on the beds to the rear of the building following a generous grant to purchase baulks of timber for terracing.

The museum shop, managed by Sue Marley, has continued to stock an attractive varied and appropriate range of gifts and souvenirs including books and cards.

Rural Proofing Resilience

The museum has continued to participate in the NLHF funded 'Rural Proofing Resilience' programme, providing guidance on marketing, business planning, governance, fundraising and finance through a series of workshops, meetings and webinars. We are particularly grateful to Sue Isherwood and Jonathan Chivers as museum leads, and for input from our Museum Development Officer Rachel Bellamy, and RPR mentors Clare Pennington and Vicky Dawson.

Outreach and Collaborative Working

Last year saw the setting up of a Young Archaeologists' Club at the museum. This is one of a national network of YAC's run to national standards and provides activities for children who have an interest in archaeology. We are very grateful to Juliet Faith, Erin Morris, and Sue Marley.

The museum supported the *Wells Heritage Trail* produced by the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism. The trail added a historical dimension to shop fronts in the City.

We participated in the *Wake Up Wells!* community event in January, opening up the Lecture room at the museum for activities.

We also supported *Urthworks*, a multi-media project by film maker Ben Rivers exhibited at Hestercombe House, Taunton. Items from the museum collections relating to the Bronze Age dwellers of Wookey Hole complemented the exhibition.

We been working with Duke of Monmouth expert Jon Jefferies in his efforts to exhibit and make more well-known this fascinating part of the City's history.

Marketing and Tourism

Throughout 2019 the Visitor Information Service for Wells continued to operate from the museum, with support from Mendip Tourism, and the museum was actively involved with initiatives to promote tourism in the City, such as Visit Wells. However following City Council elections the Council made a room available in the Town Hall for a VIS/Tourist Information Centre. The proposed move has caused considerable disquiet amongst our front of house volunteers who provide an excellent service, as it is not clear if the relocated VIS/TIC can be properly resourced.

Our front of house volunteers, too many to credit individually (but you know who you are!) do an amazing job professionally welcoming visitors to the museum and helping them get the most from their visit. All our evaluation and feedback highlights this, and the museum is most grateful for their efforts.

Partners and Stakeholders

Through Membership of Wells Heritage Partners a joint ticketing system has been established and work continues to coordinate and complement heritage activities throughout the city.

Finance

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from Wells City Council, Viridor Credits, the Wells Natural History and Archaeological Society, Clare Blackmore, the Southover Project, Marianne and Norman Adams, the Swan Hotel, Keith Dyke's family, and the Wells Lodge of the Freemasons. The hire of the Lecture Hall and Meeting Room by outside groups continues to contribute significantly to our income.

2019 was again 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 teamwork 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