

WELLS & MENDIP MUSEUM ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2016

Governance and Management

In May 2016, David Walker took over the position of Honorary Curator when Barry Lane resigned. Barry will continue to act as a Trustee on the Board. Philippa Trellfall, from the Black Dog was welcomed as a new Trustee.

Christine Quinn continues as full time Museum Manager. Philip Porter and Jonathan Chivers are the regular Museum caretakers, with Michael Brooks acting as emergency caretaker.

Accreditation

In February 2016 the Museum was awarded Full Accreditation by Arts Council England. The accreditation scheme recognises the Museum's commitment to very high standards of museum practice.

City of Wells project

Work has begun planning a new gallery at the museum relating to the history of Wells and making Balch's Study accessible for community history activities. This will be made possible through the generous bequest of Jean Imray and an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Museum visitors and Exhibitions

During 2016, the Museum hosted a total of 9 different exhibitions in our main Exhibition Room – art exhibitions featuring many different medias from local artists and painting groups including Geoff Dickson, *Michael Creed*, *Robin Gray*, *the Mendip Art Group* and *the Wells Art group* and *Liz Hand & Derek Nic*, plus a exhibition of the many *Children's Samplers* held at the Museum.

During March and April the Museum was very fortunate to be able to host a very special and exciting travelling exhibition by the *Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust* to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the closure of the S & D Railway, and in June we held the 3rd Mendip Cave photography exhibition and competition

In August 2016, we started a project, in our Meeting Room, originally conceived by Peter Coate, who was a prominent local artist, and who had long held an ambition to find a display area in Wells where artists from across the region can showcase their work. These smaller art exhibitions proved to be very successful and featured work by *Priscilla Sorapure*, *the IDArtists* and *Barbara Duncan*.

Income from museum admissions dropped slightly from £8952 in 2015 (representing about 2991 visitors) to £8259 representing around 2753 visitors. The Museum "Friend" membership remained roughly the same for individuals at 36 (41 in 2015), whereas family membership rose from 26 in 2015 to 40 in 2016.

Events

The successful annual Mendip Hills *Heritage Day* took place on 16 April. On 8-11 September we contributed to the national *Heritage Open Days* with free tours of the museum, the backroom stores and the City Archives, and also included, as part of this summer's Reredos Project at St Cuthbert's church, an exhibition and workshops by specialist conservators Lynne Humphries and Emma Norris assessing a collection of painted medieval sculpture from the church. This was a rare opportunity for visitors to see the sculptures, which are normally kept in storage.

The County Finds Liaison Officer visited the Museum four times during the year to advise members of the public on their various archaeological or historical finds.

Publications

Seven issues of the Museum Newsletter were published and circulated to Museum "Friends" and local press.

Collections

During the year 65 separate items or collections were accessioned. 16 of these were new donations, the remainder being previously collected material now documented to current standards. Notable new material includes a portrait of Harry Patch by the local artist Martin Alford, and cave diving equipment used by the late J.A. Thompson.

The collections group of volunteers have met regularly on Mondays throughout the year to check box contents and document artefacts and their locations. They have made considerable progress, including useful work on the Willcox collection of fossils and minerals.

The museum has contributed to various initiatives to raise the profile of the collections. Photographic images from the museum now figure in the digital mapping project 'Know Your Place – West of England', and cave cine film has been made available on YouTube by the Mendip Cave Registry and Archive.

City Council Archives

During 2016, considerable activity took place to continue with the fundamental aims of making the City Archives more accessible, promoting them, and ensuring a rolling programme of conservation work. The varied outreach work and exhibitions included a Family Activity Day in February to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the closure of the Somerset and Dorset Railway; talks to the Mendip Postcard Society and at Mayor Making; and an exhibition entitled "Crime and Punishment in Victorian Wells" prepared for Heritage Open Day in September. Displayed at the Town Hall, along with other Archives displays, the latter attracted an incredible total of 585 visitors. Material from the City Archives has been incorporated in the online and touring exhibitions for "Know Your Place – West of England" (a digital heritage mapping project). The Archivist has also been much involved in the preparation of "Snapshots of Wells", a joint historical exhibition with the Museum and the Bishop's Palace, which will open at the Palace in May 2017, and will include several original Archives documents.

Numerous readers have been welcomed; tours of the Archives included one for visitors from Kluczborg in Poland, with whom Wells has a Friendship Agreement; and many enquiries have been responded to. Archives development work has proceeded apace (especially with the aid of the 21 Archives volunteers), with several exciting projects underway. In particular, much effort has been expended on the creation of databases containing data from Archives documents, and on the preparation for these to go online via the Museum's website, where they will be of great value to an international audience of people researching their family or house history.

Research

Researchers continue to use the museum's collections, archives and library. Bronze Age metalwork has been examined by a PhD student from Exeter University, Middle Palaeolithic hand axes have been re-analysed by a researcher for the Lithic Study Society, and Jurassic fossils have been examined by a PhD student from Bristol University researching Ichthyosaur taxonomy. The museum welcomed the Mary Hickmott Sampler Group on a study visit.

Library

31 new titles were added in 2016 (65 in 2015), More than half of these were on Speleology, thanks largely to the continued generosity of Tony Oldham. Recorded research session (including e-mail enquiries successfully answered) totalled 133 in 2016 (101 in 2015).

Visitor Information Service and Shop

The Museum shop, and Visitor Information, (now in its 6th year), continues to be well stocked and managed by Sue Marley.

“The museum has continued to deliver the visitor information service for the City of Wells and the hard work of volunteers and the Museum Manager was recently acknowledged by our regional Destination Management Organisation who have recognised the service provided by the museum as the official tourist information service for Wells. The museum continues to coordinate with its partners, particularly the cathedral, Bishop’s Palace, Civic Society and the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism to improve all aspects of the visitor experience in Wells. We are also delighted by the close partnership with the hotels and B&Bs, many of who invest their own time and money in attracting visitors to our wonderful city and its stunning setting between Mendip Hills and the Somerset Levels.”

Finance

The Museum continues to maintain a good working relationship with Wells City Council. Grants and donations received this year included the Wells Lodge of the Freemasons, Rothschild in the Community, the Wells Natural History and Archaeology Society and the Wells U3A.

Our regular user groups continue to grow. Their hire of the Lecture Hall and Meeting Room contributes significantly to our income. 2016 also saw a new 5-year contract with a local group.

Partners, sponsors and volunteers

The main sponsors and donors to *Wells Remembers* were Wells Reclamation, Mr Peter Knight and Mr R. Trott of Shepton Mallet for the loan of his ship models to mark the centenary of the Battle of Jutland. Yet again, many volunteers also gave so much time to this project – notably Geoff Dickson for the addition of the tank in the trench and the first aid post, and Sue and Alan Curragh, Richard Witcombe and Mark “Gonzo” Lumley for the stories for 2016 (the stories for 2017 will be appearing in the coming weeks). The HLF funding has now come to an end after two years and private donors have kindly made funds available to allow the refreshing of displays until the end of 2018. Our partners at the Blue and Cathedral Schools continue to visit both the museum and the battlefields of France and Belgium - and special mention should be made of Dan Vidler and the pupils from Coxley School who allowed us to host their Shrouds exhibition to remember the Battle of the Somme.

Volunteers

The Museum remains totally dependent on our large bank of volunteers, which now numbers around 60, who have a wide range of skills, and that are too numerous to name individually. The Board wishes to record its sincere thanks to all of them. Sadly, 2016 also saw the passing of two of the Museum’s long-term volunteers – Rupert Thorogood, our volunteer electrician, and Jean Mann who helped on both the Front of House desk and in the Library.

David Walker, Honorary Curator