

## **Curator's Report 2022**

### **Governance and Management**

The Board currently comprises nine Trustees:

Sue Isherwood - Chairperson  
Marilyn Cattell – Treasurer  
Hannah Bennett  
Clare Blackmore  
Richard Lovegrove  
Jenny Rust  
Philippa Threlfall  
Andrew Webb  
Joseph White

In March Martin Grass resigned from the board of trustees, and Hannah Bennet was appointed as a trustee. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator, and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Jeff Stygall, Philip Porter and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum caretakers.

Work resumed on the initiative to convert museum governance to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), following a successful grant application to the South West Museum Development partnership (SWMD) by Sue Isherwood. A Shadow CIO board was established comprising Simon Armstrong (Chair), Bruce Scobie, and Sue Isherwood. A draft CIO Constitution has been prepared by Counterculture LLP with advice from museum consultant Vicky Dawson.

### **Covid-19**

Recovery from the pandemic continues. Premises hire during the earlier part of the year was less than in previous years but improved during the latter part of the year.

### **Search & Learn project**

The museum's *Search & Learn* project, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) has been the museum's top priority this year, bringing additional resources and capacity to our programmes as well as capital funding to refurbish spaces within the museum building. Project Manager Victoria Northwood joined us in January and has most ably managed and implemented the project's activity plan. Collections Manager Matt Williams started in September and has made great progress digitising glass plate negatives from the Phillips Collection. Melita Armitage has been appointed as the project's Evaluation Consultant.

Victoria Northwood reports:

Interpretation consultants Far Post Design were appointed in June, and have now completed their developed design for the refurbishment of the Wells City Galleries, Herbert Balch's Study and the ground floor café area, due to be completed in 2023. Volunteer development is at the heart of the *Search & Learn* project, and working with partners we have been able to offer our current team training in Museum Mentoring (Holburne Museum), Mental Health First Aid (HeadsUp Somerset) and Object Handling (South West Museums Development). Four new volunteers have joined the team for

fixed term placements organised with our project partners Bath Spa University and Job Centre Plus: David Allen, Aubrey Banks, Matthew Chislett and James Hunt. During the year the NLHF grant has provided financial support for a range of activities described below, including the creation of a new ceramic mural for the garden, and celebration of this volunteer effort through a temporary exhibition, *The Changing Shops of Wells* exhibition and short film, and five family days. The project Management Group (comprising the Project Manager, Curator and three Trustees) meets monthly to provide oversight, and the project Steering Group (which includes museum Trustees and volunteers, representatives from key project partners and the Museum Development Officer for Somerset) meets twice a year to review progress and provide input into the project's development.

The project has a dedicated section within the museum's web-site, including a blog: <https://www.wellsmuseum.org.uk/search-and-learn-project>

### **Exhibitions & Activities**

*The Changing Shops of Wells* exhibition opened 16<sup>th</sup> April, curated by Clare Blackmore and others in partnership with Wells City Archives, the Civic Society, Project Factory, and Somerset Film. It featured photographs of the shops in Wells between the 1890s and the present day and proved most successful, bringing many visitors into the museum. A community day held on 26<sup>th</sup> February resulted in the acquisition of a number of Wells City photographs and other items into the collections, and Somerset Film used this event as an opportunity to capture interview footage which featured in the short film which was produced to accompany the exhibition.

The museum's new ceramic *Garden Mural* was unveiled 24<sup>th</sup> September. It depicts three characters who significantly contributed to the wellbeing of the city's residents, Bishop Beckynton who constructed a conduit to supply the city with fresh water, Dean William Turner 'the father of English botany' who's Herbal was the first to be written in English, and the founder of the museum caver Herbert Balch.

The mural was unveiled by contemporary representatives of these three, the Rt Reverend Ruth Worsley Bishop of Taunton, the Very Revd Dr John Davies Dean of Wells, and locally based caver Chris Jewell who was involved in the rescue of members of a junior football team from the flooded Tham Luang cave in Thailand.

The mural was conceived by museum trustee and ceramicist Philippa Threlfall and made by local volunteers and pupils from Stoberry Park School.

The exhibition *Making the Mural* opened the same day. It featured photographs taken by Ann Cook and showed the processes involved in making the new mural.

In addition to these NLHF supported exhibitions and activities the museum also hosted a very full programme of exhibitions by local artists: Michael Brobson, the Old Bakery Artists, Shades of Shipham, Arik Casey, the Draycott art group, Robin Gray & Ceris Jones, the Wells art group, Tom Sleigh & the U3A, and as part of the Somerset Art Works weeks, Chris Lee. We also enjoyed exhibitions of sculpture from Martin Cody, calligraphy from the Mendip Calligraphy group, and hosted a photographic exhibition by the Mid Somerset Camera club.

In April the museum hosted the Mendip Area Community Archaeology Forum (MACAF) event. It was encouraging to see so many community archaeologists together after a difficult two years and to hear about the wide range of excavations, surveys and other activities being planned and carried out in our area.

A small display of Royal memorabilia including Silver Jubilee material was created for Queen Elizabeth's Platinum Jubilee Celebrations in June.

In August, September and October we piloted a series of free family workshops inspired by the collections. These were organised in partnership with Somerset Art Works and led by artists Fiona Cambell, Jan Ollis, Sean Harris and Jacky Oliver. Jan Ollis returned in December to deliver a further Christmas craft workshop, and we also held a very successful Christmas craft market, selling all sorts of handmade Christmas gifts and treats.

### **Learning**

Hilary Waters stepped down as Volunteer Learning Officer in June. Hilary was also involved with the *Wells and Transatlantic Slavery* project. Clare Blackmore and Hilary Waters have contributed to the Wells Heritage Partnership Gormley offering for schools, and the *China Comes to Wells* family day in June. We are most grateful for Hilary's time and expertise which she brought to the Learning Officer role.

### **Collections**

To date 73 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. 30 of these were newly acquired material, and 43 were items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

### **Conservation**

As part of the *China Comes to Wells* project, made possible by Vicky Dawson's application to Arts Council England for a grant to the Wells Pottery Study Group, a significant number of Chinese Export Porcelain items from the museum's Garden Excavation Archive have been reconstructed by conservator Helena Jaeschke. They are now on display in the right-hand case in the Meeting Room. To date £1,210 has also been raised by a Crowdfunder campaign towards the conservation of a polychrome porcelain tea set from the Garden Excavation Archive.

### **Documentation & Research**

We are grateful to the Collections team Joan Goddard, Richard Kilroy, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts and Pete Missingham for their sterling efforts, in particular Richard for his work on the museum's seals and friendly society club poleheads. There are currently 31,136 records in the museum 'database', an increase of 941 in a year. Work continues both adding new records, and also rationalising duplicate records.

We are also grateful to David Dawson, Oliver Kent, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group for working on the porcelain material from the Wells Museum Garden Excavation Archive as part of the *China Comes to Wells* project. An excellent booklet *China Comes to Wells* was published, and in June the museum hosted a well-

received family day on the museum's Chinese Export Porcelain, with thanks to Vicky Dawson, Sue Isherwood, Clare Blackmore and Hilary Waters.

February saw the long-awaited launch of Jean Imray's book *Old Wells Almshouse*, published by the museum. See the Wells City Archives report below.

In April, Jesse McCabe of the Crick Institute sampled some 25 specimens of human bone in the museum collections for archaic DNA. Results are awaited. In another project P. Swali & P. Skoglund of the Crick Institute have identified extinct lineages of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for plague, in other material in the museum collections. They sampled 4,000-year-old human remains excavated from Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet in the 1970s.

We also benefitted from research by *Search & Learn* partner placements: Aubrey Banks, a postgraduate student at Bath Spa University, spent several weeks April - July researching objects in the collection associated with the Monmouth Rebellion and its commemoration over the years. James Hunt, a recent graduate referred to the museum by Job Centre Plus in September, has undertaken work to improve our understanding of the Balch family genealogy.

## **Library**

### Staffing

We no longer have enough Library Assistants to cover Tuesday to Friday. Researchers need to get in touch in advance for visits. If there is no Library Assistant available on the day in question, I will do my best to fill the gap myself. Meanwhile I shall be glad to hear of any new volunteers.

### Historic newspapers

In 2021 a run of the *Wells Journal* from 1998 to 2003 was added to the Library collection held in the Attic. Since then a series of titles commemorating the Queen's death and the accession of Charles III have become part of the collection.

### Accessions

New titles added in 2022 (excluding pamphlets): 63 [55] compared with 44 [10] in 2021. Figures in square brackets show additions to the Coleridge Archive of a further 40 titles acquired from The Friends of Coleridge Library, previously in the Coleridge Cottage of the National Trust. We have thus doubled the number of books in our Archive for the £33 cost of carriage. This welcome windfall has led us to rethink the original shelving of the Archive in the Attic, where access is unsuitable for visiting researchers. I can now report, that, with the agreement of the Curator, that the entire Coleridge Archive has been moved to the Library itself, conveniently close to the research table. The Archive now neatly fills the Library shelves that previously housed the non-Somerset counties which have now exchanged places in the Attic.

### Exhibitions

The exhibition comprising books, and other material relevant to the Coleridge Archive, is now in the same room as the Archive. We shall keep the Coleridge Exhibition in place until a new topic is suggested.

### Recorded Research Sessions

2021: 30; 2022: 61

### Finance

The Killens sale of books irrelevant to the Library's traditional holdings yielded some £200 which paid the £33 for moving the Nether Stowey books. Part of the balance will bind the latest copies of customarily bound periodicals.

*My thanks to my Assistants: to Keith Cattell and Mike Brooks for weekly sessions and to Andrew Haymes, Katy Stenhouse and Tom Nicol for heroic work in moving the Coleridge Archive from Attic to Library.*

Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian

### **Wells City Archives**

This year Wells City Archives continued to respond to public enquiries and finally answered the backlog that had accrued during the coronavirus lockdown. The archive received a number of visitors who have researched a range of subjects from the Second World War to the history of St Thomas Street. The environmental conditions needed to best preserve the collection have been maintained, and last year's investment by the museum in a new dehumidifier has made this much easier to achieve.

A number of archive projects have continued throughout 2022. Austin Little has been working on his detailed database of the Petty Sessions records. Work on Scrasebase continues, drawing upon the fantastic research into the various properties in Wells undertaken by historian Tony Scrase. Dr Julia Wood, Tony Scrase and Austin Little are preparing the final draft of this. Dr Wood has also worked in collaboration with Joe White on developing the archive's online resources which can be accessed from the museum website. We now have part of Austin's Petty Sessions database available to search, as well as a summary of Sacrament certificates that are held by the archive. There is also the 1860 property index available, and we have plans to release an online version of Scrasebase here too. The archive has continued to assist with the Wells transatlantic slavery project with David Mather applying his research talents in support of this.

Dr Wood gave two talks. The first, with Peter Trueman, was presented to the Wells branch of the Royal British Legion in March. They discussed the Honorary Freedom of the City of Wells as well as the history of the former location of the British Legion in Wells, now the Venue Club. The second, in April, addressed the Mendip Postcard Club on the subject of Dr Wood's eleven years as City Archivist. The archive also provided resources for 'The Changing Shops of Wells,' an exhibition in partnership with the museum, Project Factory, Somerset Film and Wells Civic Society. The archives provided photographs from the Patrick Brown collection, with Alan Pringle identifying the properties photographed. Dr Wood also promoted the publication of the late Jean Imray's book 'Wells Old Almshouse,' edited by Dr Wood, Frances Neale and Anne Crawford and published by the museum, with a launch at the City of Wells Almshouses in February. Jean Imray was the first City Archivist, and the book includes many sources held by the archive. A free copy of the publication has been made available to download from the museum's website.

Following Dr Julia Wood's retirement in April, Veronica Howe took over as City Archivist in May and has created a new format for the general catalogue for the whole collection. The new catalogue meets international archival standards and will be of

enormous benefit in both managing the collection and eventually releasing a summary of the whole collection online. She returns to the Cathedral as archivist leaving the City Archives with an improved cataloguing plan incorporating the new catalogue at the centre of this. We are very grateful to Veronica for the time she has spent with us.

Finally, Dr Julia Wood retired as City Archivist in April after eleven years, and the archives is hugely indebted to her for her time spent at the helm. She has guided the Archives from the town hall jail cells to its new modern environment in the museum stores, whilst offering researchers of the history of Wells a fascinating and far more accessible resource than had previously been available. In her tenure, exhibitions from the Inns, Mills, Police, Firefighters of Wells and many others were displayed, receiving praise from her peers for her outreach programme, in what has been a very exciting time for the archives. Her enthusiasm, depth of knowledge and leadership will be greatly missed.

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. We are most grateful to Joe White for his work developing and maintaining the website.

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Website visitors	5,601	8,374	8,712	9,945
Facebook followers	630	935	1,696	2,018
Instagram followers	230	880	1,129	1,228

A new venue hire microsite was developed by one of our Search & Learn volunteer placements Matthew Chislett, and this can be accessed via the main website:

[Venue Hire | Wells & Mendip Museum \(wellsmus.wixsite.com\)](https://wellsmus.wixsite.com/venue-hire)

Joseph White reports:

The number of unique visitors ('users') has increased by 14.5%, rising to 9,945 (8,712 in 2021). As was the case in the previous year, new users make up the majority of this figure, with a 15.5% increase from 2021. There has also been a 20% increase in visits to the site ('sessions'), and a 25% increase in overall page views.

It is interesting to note that the 35-44 group now represents the largest age cohort of visitors, at 18.65% of total users. For the first time this group is bigger than the 45-54 and 65+ age groups. There has also been a slight increase in the number of users in the 18-24 age group, which now stands at 11.2% of total visitors.

A new Search and Learn Project page was launched in February 2022. In the period to 31 December 2022 (10 months) it has been viewed 459 times.

The museum's Instagram reached 4,391 accounts in 2022, a slight decrease from 2021 (4,837). The number of followers has increased from 1,129 to 1,228. The museum's Facebook page received 3,378 visits, with 2,018 followers. The Facebook page reached a

slightly older audience than Instagram, but on both platforms the 45-54 age cohort was our largest audience.

### **Building, Garden, and Shop**

Many areas of the museum received attention by the Building Maintenance team during the year. They redecorated the Archives office, they refurbished the ground floor side corridor display space, and upgraded the Old Kitchen/Rest Room. The redundant plant room in the Stores complex was converted into a store, and the undercover area to the right of the Stores building was enclosed. They provided considerable assistance to the Librarian in reorganising the Library Attic storage areas, to the Curator in clearing Balch's Study and Wells Rooms in advance of the Search & Learn refurbishments, and to Philippa Threlfall and the *Garden Mural* team.

Norman and Marianne Adams, and other Garden Volunteers continued to develop the museum garden throughout the year. They made the side passage beds more attractive and worked on the wildflower area. For several years we benefitted from the loan of Adams' events shelter, and in addition the museum now has its own shelter to widen the range of facilities we can include in our premises hire offer. A most successful garden open day and plant sale was held in May.

The shop continues to be successfully managed by Volunteer Shop Manager Jan Whittaker. Stock continues to have a local focus and is reasonably priced. Sales are unfortunately down on previous years, on account of the current cost-of-living squeeze. A new till with an electronic point of sale (EPOS) system has been purchased and is being programmed. We are very grateful to Hannah Bennett for her advice with this.

### **Sustainability**

The Old Kitchen Room was refurbished using upcycled furniture and re-purposed materials.

In November Trustees Sue Isherwood and Hannah Bennett completed the online Carbon Literacy Training provided by SWMD.

### **Outreach and Collaborative Working**

In 2021 the Antony Gormley statue *Doubt* was installed on the West Front of Wells Cathedral, and the museum continues to work with the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, and the Project Factory on a learning offering and other activities relating to the installation.

Wells and Transatlantic Slavery - Histories, Perspectives and Legacies: The museum is a member of this group of institutions and individuals which was established in 2021. This year we have contributed by sharing information on two of the more unusual items in the museum collections, a pair of shackles and a mastiff dog collar. These were found in the 1970s at the Cedars, a property previously owned by the Tudway family before it became part of Wells Cathedral School. The group is currently working to create a website and town trail.

In September, for Heritage Open Days, the museum organised an event with storyteller Jane Flood based on the Chinese Export Porcelain items from the museum's Garden Excavation Archive.

October saw the unveiling of the new *Mendip Way* plaque on the front of the museum. To commemorate 50 years of the Mendip Hills Area of Natural Beauty, the East and West Mendip Ways were renamed the Mendip Way, which passes in front of the museum. The route has been refurbished with support from local Rotary Clubs.

### **Marketing and Tourism**

This year we republished our A5 flier 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 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 SWMD it is now possible to quantify the economic impact of our visitors locally:

“In 2021/22, your museum had **26,002** visitors

Wells and Mendip Museum Economic Impact of Visitors figures 2021/22:

Local Visitors: £158,227

Day Visitors: £402,761

Total Economic Impact of Visitors to the Local Economy: **£560,988**”

(source: SWMD annual museum survey)

### **Finance**

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from National Lottery Heritage Fund, Wells City Council, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society, Sue Isherwood, Donavan family, Joan Goddard, Contributors to the Porcelain Conservation Crowdfunder, and South West Museum Development with thanks to funding from Arts Council England and Art Fund.

2022 was a very busy year for all at the museum. Through the expertise, determination and teamwork of our sixty plus volunteers we have achieved so much, 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 Community Heritage and 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