

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: Tuesday – Saturday 10am – 4pm (Closed Sundays & Mondays)

First Floor Exhibition Room

16 February – 11 April

“Smashed in the Cellar - The exploration of a mystery in the museum garden”

We have been sorting through piles of pottery for the past few years, and slowly pots have emerged from the pile of sherds, thanks largely to project curator Oliver Kent's wizardry in doing 3D puzzles.

The aim of the exhibition is to reveal life in a household in Wells (focussing largely on the 18th century) through this remarkable collection of broken pottery. The spine-tingling aspect to the show is that the pottery belonged in the house in which it will be on show – it was chosen, bought, used and cherished right here, at 8 Cathedral Green.

The exhibition will also feature a contemporary response to the collection from local artist Duncan Cameron, whose work many of you will be familiar with as he's exhibited at the museum before. Duncan has been running workshops inspired by the pottery with attendees at two community healthcare settings in Wells – Heads Up and The Lawrence Centre. The work created by these groups will be on display too.



A major coup for us is that we've secured the loan of the evocative 18th century oil painting **The Tea Party**, by Richard Collins from the Goldsmiths Company in London. This was a nail-biting affair as we had to demonstrate that we could not only meet the strict environmental conditions stipulated by the lender – heat, light, humidity – but also ensure we had enough gallery stewards to invigilate the painting at all times the exhibition is open to the public. Several months of diligent environmental monitoring and a mammoth recruitment effort and we made it! Thirty-two new volunteers will be joining us over the two months of the show.

Museum entry fees apply

There will be a number of events inspired by the exhibition during the course of its run:

Thursday 14 March – A webinar in which David Dawson and Oliver Kent will introduce the exhibition. Organised by Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

<https://sanhs.org/programme-of-events-2023-2024/>

Easter holidays (date tbc) – a family day of pottery related activities at the museum.

Saturday 6 April – Pottery study day in association with the Post Medieval and Later Pottery Research Group.

None of the above would have been possible without funding from Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. If you would like more information on the Family Day or the Study day, please contact: Vicky Dawson, project manager & curator vickym@dawsonheritage.co.uk



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



Ground Floor Meeting Room

23 January – 19 February

“Get to Know Your Museum 2”



The second round of our creative mentoring programme “Get to know your museum” is nearing completion and the participants will share their creative responses to the collections in a pop-up exhibition to be held in the Meeting Room from 26 January. Their work has been inspired variously by the life and work of Herbert Balch, the Coleridge collection held in the museum’s library, fossils and geological formations.

Do come and take a look! **Museum entry fees apply**

27 February – 2 March

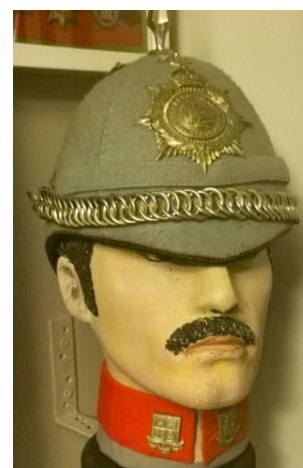
“Heads & Soldiers” by Geoff Dickson

This exhibition will feature a display of different soldiers and warriors from all over the world, but specializing in the British Infantry from Victorian to WW1 & WW2.

Apart from being a military historian, Geoff is an artist, sculptor and author and his work has been featured in various military museums throughout the UK. He was also one of the major designers of the WWI trench here at the museum.

Many of the items on display, including some of his books will be for sale and Geoff will also be taking commissions.

Museum entry fees apply



5 – 16 March – An exhibition by Chris Binding



The Witch of Wookey Exhibition showcases the latest research into the legacy and legend of the eponymous Witch, with a strong case for the dates, facts, supporting evidence, literary references etc.. Was she, or they, real rather than hearsay? You decide... **Museum entry fees apply**

19 March – 27 April - Wells and Mendip Garden Exhibition

This exhibition will contain some historical context together with a chronology in text and images of its reconstruction since autumn 2019. The exhibition will also feature aerial drone footage of the garden and its setting within the historic core of Wells. Children will be encouraged to take an interest with art materials and an educational trail through the garden to identify spring-flowering plants which will be appearing at that time. All visitors will be welcome to combine the exhibition with a visit to the garden and enjoy its tranquility and unique setting.

Museum entry fees apply



Search & Learn project



We are delighted that work on our new displays are nearing completion. Visitors are now able to visit the Wells City Galleries on the first floor of the museum, and a complementary display has been installed in the Lecture Room Foyer (near the coffee machine) for those unable to manage the stairs. We hope that Herbert Balch's Study will be opened for the first time in the next few weeks. You can catch a glimpse of the work which has gone into restoring the study in a new film which we have commissioned on the museum's founder, now available on Somerset Film's YouTube site:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyyCJ4d3l0U>

The second round of our creative mentoring programme 'Get to know your museum' is nearing completion and the participants will share their creative responses to the collections in a pop-up exhibition to be held in the Meeting Room from 26 January. Do come and take a look! Details above.

As we enter the final phase of the Search & Learn project the focus will be on a series of exhibitions and events. "*Smashed in the Cellar*", an exhibition guest-curated by Vicky Dawson, will be held in the Exhibition Room 16 February - 11 April. Details above. **Victoria Northwood, Project Manager**

News from the Curator

New Findings from a Cave at Charterhouse

It is really rewarding when advances in science are able to tell us something new about museum collections. DNA sequencing is one such powerful technique. It has a range of modern medical applications, but it can also be used to tell us more about our ancestors.

In the museum collections are the remains of over thirty humans who were buried together in a cave near Charterhouse Warren. They were discovered in the 1970s by cavers hoping to dig into new cave. We have a display in the Balch Room at the museum created by volunteer Steve Tofts if you would like to know more about the cave and the excavation.

These finds have been investigated for a number of years by researchers at Oxford University. Several of the human remains have been Carbon-14 dated, showing them to be of Bronze Age and Iron Age origin. What we know so far is a complicated and incomplete story. To find out more, in 2022 researchers from the Francis Crick Institute sampled some of the remains to analyse their archaic DNA. These findings will appear in a paper which is still in preparation.



Balch Room display

The Francis Crick team are developing new methods of searching the archaic DNA samples they screen for anything of interest, and they found two features worth reporting on. The first is that traces of DNA from the plague bacterium *Yersinia pestis* were found in two of the Bronze Age individuals who lived about 4,000 years ago. This 'LNBA' strain is known from Central European sites, but this is the first time it has been found in the United Kingdom.

The team also identified an aneuploidy (a chromosomal genetic anomaly) in another of the individuals sampled, an Iron Age individual who lived 2,500 years ago. She was about 20 years old when she died and had mosaic Turner Syndrome, a condition brought about by the partial absence of one of the x chromosomes, the most significant feature in appearance being a short stature. This is the first recorded instance of Turner syndrome in the ancient genetic record.

The cave, Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet, is one of the most extraordinary cave archaeology sites in the UK. There is not much to see on the surface, and the cave is on private property. However it is gradually revealing its secrets to cutting-edge scientific techniques.

Smashed in the Cellar

There is a lot going on behind the scenes in the run-up to the major upcoming exhibition 'Smashed in the Cellar', based on the finds from the museum garden. Vicky Dawson who is curating the exhibition recently had a letter published in the Guardian newspaper about the exhibition, the importance of local museums and the difficulties in funding such activities:

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/jan/10/how-remnants-of-the-past-foster-understanding-and-compassion>

David Walker, Curator

News from the City Archives

Work on the database of the Petty Sessions cases for Wells has now been completed. The cases fall between the years 1822 and 1899 and show the lowest level of the court system at the time. Cases of drunkenness, traffic offenses and others are listed, and together they show a really interesting side of 19th Century life for the people of Wells when things have maybe not gone quite to plan.

The database shows stories such as the obscene language of Florence Baker of South Street in 1899, or the discovery that George Vile had been selling sub standard pints of gin, amongst others.

The database has been produced by a team of volunteers and its design is thanks to Austin Little. Many thousands of records have been transcribed and it is a fantastic achievement, led by the former archivist Dr Julia Wood. The database will be released very soon from the Wells City Archives section of the museum's website. The City Archives is hugely grateful to everyone who has given up their time to make this project happen. It will be a great resource for family history researchers and anyone interested in the social history of Wells in the 19th century.



News from the Library

Staffing: One of our new members of staff (Juliet Faith) has sadly had to withdraw following the death of her mother and all that it involves. We hope that she may return later in the year. Apart from Juliet, there is still room for two more assistants. .

New Titles Added in 2023: Total additions 41. Last year's total in square brackets [61 titles: includes 50-odd titles expelled by National Trust from Coleridge Cottage, Nether Stowey.] Of 2023's 41 titles, 13 were added to the Coleridge Archive and 12 to the Arts and Crafts section.

Use of Library for Study: 90 signatures in 2023 (many repetitive: Nicolas Brown 27, Clare Blackmore 15, Mark Hutchinson 5). [66 signatures 2022]

Outside Visits to Library: (a) Former Old Deanery Garden helpers: come to view Turner's Book Collection (normally in Attic). (b) Local Studies Libraries: useful advice though not all feasible. (c) Visitors come to see the Platten Scrapbooks held in the Steel Cupboard.

Exhibition (installed late 2022): The exhibits moved into the Library include: the stuffed albatross; extracts from Captain Cook's second voyage; William Wales (Cook's astronomer) describes sea snakes as Coleridge does in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 edition: Wordsworth attempts to exclude *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge objects; Wordsworth moves it to the back of the book and inserts footnote listing Coleridge's defects!

Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian

Wells & Mendip Museum going forward

New Admission Charges

As many of you will know, the museum is an independent charitable trust which has to finance its ongoing activities. It earns income primarily through shop sales, room hire, commission on exhibition sales, donations, and crucially through admission charges.

Being independent, it receives no core funding from local authorities or national government agencies, and as it owns the museum building, it has to fund its

maintenance. In many ways the museum 'punches above its weight'; the museum building is a centuries-old Grade 2 listed structure, continually in need of maintenance, and it cares for a large and significant collection in stores with a controlled environment.

During the period since the Covid pandemic we have seen a deteriorating financial situation as the costs and charges of our suppliers have risen, whilst our overall income has fallen or certainly not increased. To mitigate this, after much consideration of a number of options, the trustees have decided that we have to increase our admission charges.

With our new galleries and community offer, we believe that we can still give excellent value for money. If we want to continue to serve the city and its visitors as we for almost 100 years, we must ensure our financial stability.

The new admission charges, **applicable from 1st February 2024**, are:-

Adult // £6

Child* // £3

Family** // £12

Student // £3

Visitor with disability // £3 (free entry for carer)

*Under 5s no charge

**2 adults + 3 children 5 to 16 years

As before, Museum Friend membership includes free entry. Group rates are available on request and there is always free entry to museum shop.

Other events at the museum

Saturday 27th January 12pm – 5pm – Concert by Jenny Bliss

Tuesday 30th January at 2.30pm – **“Climate and Ecological Crisis? What's all the fuss about?”** A talk by David Ramsden MBE co-founder of the Barn Owl Trust. An easy-to-follow look at the whole subject primarily aimed at sceptics, people who don't get it, and people think they do, but haven't done anything about it.

Wells and District Wildlife Group

Friday 2nd February at 2.30pm – **“The Mendip Hospital and its Patients - the Victorian/Edwardian history of the Somerset and Bath County Pauper Asylum 1848 to 1923”** by Clare Blackmore. Clare is Vice Chair of the Friends of the Mendip Hospital Cemetery, a three acre plot of land off the Bath Road in Wells, which is the last resting place of some 3,000 souls who were patients at the Asylum, later the Wells Mental Hospital and latterly the Mendip Hospital, which closed in 1991. The talk will tell some of their stories and the ethos of their treatment and care.

Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society

Tuesday 27th February at 2.30pm – “The Modern Bird of Prey & Urban Evolution” by Naomi Johns. Director - West Of England Falconry Ltd - This topic is a really interesting one, particularly for modern day bird watching and giving a better insight of adapting wildlife to a wider variety of communities. You don't have to be able to access the best of British countryside to be a raptor watcher anymore, and urban environments are becoming just as dependable as traditional ones for a few native species, but for others, proving a great challenge.

Wells and District Wildlife Group

Wednesday 28th February – 10.30am – 3.30pm - Drawing Skills Workshop with Tina Dodd. This workshop will explore how to draw and what we actually see rather than what we think we see, learning how to describe 3-dimensional forms on the flat surface of our sketchbooks. By the end of the day you will have gained confidence to tackle all kind of different subjects and will be taking home a few sketchbook pages of drawings to hopefully inspire you further. £55 for the day
For more information or to book a place, please contact Tina Dodd
tinajdodd@hotmail.com 01934 843660

Friday 8th March at 7.30pm – “A Visible History of King's Castle Wood” (following the AGM of the Society) by David Cottle. Between 1987 and 2022 David was the voluntary warden for the Somerset Wildlife Trust's King's Castle Wood. Although mainly interested in the wildlife found there, he became more aware of its history as his involvement grew. Even today, much of the history remains visible to any visitor to the reserve. **Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society**

Come and join our team!

Cleaner needed

We are looking for a daily cleaner for the museum.

7.5 hours per week. £10.42 per hour.

For more information please contact Christine Fewer, Museum

Manager admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk

Closing date Monday 5th February.

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