

Curator's Report 2023

Governance and Management

The board currently comprises six trustees:

Sue Isherwood - Chairperson

Marilyn Cattell – Treasurer

Hannah Bennett

Richard Lovegrove

Philippa Threlfall

Andrew Webb

During the year three trustees resigned: Jenny Rust in May, and Clare Blackmore and Joseph White in July. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Jeff Stygall and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum caretakers.

Work continues on the initiative to convert museum governance to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). A constitution for the new CIO has been agreed and accepted by the Charity Commission, and work on vesting and transfer is underway.

The museum's Business Development Group met three times during the year and reported to the board. In a separate initiative Sue Isherwood is investigating fund-raising, and proposals were brought to the board in December.

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 this year, bringing additional resources and capacity to our programmes as well as capital funding to refurbish spaces within the museum building. In December interpretation consultants Far Post Design completed the main fit-out work on the two Wells City galleries, Balch's Study, and the ground floor Foyer area, although there is still work to be done in all these areas by museum volunteers, which will be prioritised.

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.

Volunteer development is at the heart of the *Search & Learn* project, and we have been able to offer our current team training in several different areas. In June and July communication specialists The Whole Story visited the museum to deliver training in constructing narratives around galleries and collections, and supported a group of volunteers to co-create a tour of the new Wells City Galleries. In December we commissioned AgeUK Somerset to deliver a Dementia Awareness Workshop. Thanks to additional funding secured by Vicky Dawson from Arts Council England we were also able to provide training sessions in Collections Care & Conservation and Exhibition Development & Production during September and October. Four new volunteers have joined the team for fixed term placements organised with our project partners Bath Spa University and Job Centre Plus: Nathan Ferrari, Jordan Cole, Alysha Alexander and Vittoria Grazi.

During the year the NLHF grant has provided financial support for a range of activities. A collections focused creative programme delivered in partnership with Somerset Art Works began in the first quarter with a weekly art group 'Time & Place' led by Sara Dudman RWA. This was based in the museum and focused on a range of collections and techniques. This was followed in the second quarter by a series of weekly sessions based at HeadsUp Somerset in South Horrington. Artists Jade Ogden and Sally Dempsey worked with groups experiencing mental health challenges, dementia and learning disabilities to create a collaborative artwork inspired by drinking vessels in the museum's collections, from iron age beakers to 18th century Chinese export porcelain. The work, titled *Welcome to the Brown Moth Café*, features printmaking, textiles and clay work, and was installed in the Cathedral as part of Wells Art Contemporary, reaching around 20,000 people.

During the remainder of the year the focus returned to 8 Cathedral Green with Get to Know Your Museum, a programme encouraging individuals to explore the museum and its collections in partnership with one of the museum's volunteer mentors, supported by the Curator and artist Jan Ollis. The outputs of all three activities were showcased through pop-up exhibitions in the museum's Meeting Room. In February and August photographer Richard Tomlinson visited the museum to deliver two drop-in creative workshops for families based around the Cyanotype process and these proved very popular.

Partnership work with Somerset Film also continued this year, and three new films are at various stages of development. A Community Day was held in May to encourage members of the public to share their memories of the Wells City Carnival and further interviews with the outgoing President Maurice Day and members of the Carnival in Somerset Promotion Project took place in September. A film on Herbert Balch was completed during the course of the year and can now be watched via the Somerset Film YouTube channel; a further film focusing on mental healthcare in Wells past and present is also in production.

2023 was the centenary of the Wells Pageant, and an exhibition *The Wells Pageant of 1923 - A Celebration of Community*, guest curated by Bath Spa student Jordan Cole, was displayed in the Exhibition Room during July and August. The exhibition provided an opportunity to offer a screening of the Windrose Rural Media Trust film *Restaging the Past: The Story of Historical Pageants* and we were most grateful to Professors Paul Readman and Mark Freeman who have an academic interest in Historical Pageants, for making the journey from London to offer a Q&A as part of this event. A further exhibition *The Band Plays On*, created in partnership with the Wells City Band, was installed in the Meeting Room in October and remained on display until the new year.

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) met in March to review progress and provide input into the project's development. During the course of the year we have also shared learning from the project through presentations for members of the SW Federation of Museums and Galleries, Museums in Somerset and Somerset Wildlife Trust.

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 and Activities

In addition to these NLHF supported exhibitions and activities the museum also hosted a very full programme of exhibitions by local artists.

In our Exhibition Room: February – Chris Mottram, March – Marianne Lowen King, Freddie Bird, & Lorraine Reilly Millington, April – National Acrylic Painters' Association, Wendy Lovegrove, May – Pennie Elfick & Susan Gradwell, June – Draycott art club, Martin Bentham. September – Wells art group, October – Old Bakery artists, November – Shades of Shipham, and in December – Michael Brobson.

Other exhibitions in Exhibition Room were: January – Duncan Cameron, September – Lesley Irving (textiles), September/October - Philippa Threlfall and Anneke Dissevelt (clay & mixed media), and in October – Avalon Stitchers.

In our Meeting Room: April – Rotary Club International (postcard exhibition), May – John Hardin (Photography), and in June – Tina Westcott & Rose Atkinson (Photography).

A successful Christmas Craft Market was held in December.

Learning

In June we appointed a freelance Learning Officer Katherine Webber to develop a new formal learning programme. This role is being supported for one year through the Wyndham Fund and *Search & Learn* funding. Katherine has been working with the museum's curator, local schools, and educational advisors to scope a range of activities and resources linked to both the National Curriculum and the content of the new galleries. She has also been working with Wells Heritage Partners with regard to Wells Transatlantic Slavery, and Gormley.

Collections

97 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. 50 were items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards, and 27 were newly acquired material.

Conservation

Following on from the 2022 *China Comes to Wells* project, Vicky Dawson from the Wells Pottery Study Group secured further funding from Arts Council England to augment NLHF funding for an exhibition early in 2024, *Smashed in the Cellar*, also on material excavated from the museum garden in the 1990s. Various items have been reconstructed by conservator Helena Jaeschke for this exhibition.

Documentation & Research

Prior to work on the new Wells galleries the collections in both galleries were returned to storage by volunteers previously trained in handling collections. These were primarily natural history and social history items which have now been documented to current standards by the collections team Joan Goddard, Richard Kilroy, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts, Pete Missingham and Sam Maclaren.

We have also documented several large collections in more detail. There are currently 32,776 records in the museum 'database', an increase of 1,640 in 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, Oliver Kent, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group for working on the Wells Museum Garden pottery material in advance of the forthcoming exhibition *Smashed in the Cellar*.

Two academic papers have been written during the year based on sampling in 2022 by the Crick Institute of archaic DNA human remains excavated from Charterhouse Warren Farm Shaft in the 1980s. The first paper reports on the earliest known traces of the plague bacterium in the UK: Swale, P., Schulting, R., Gilardet, A. *et al.* *Yersinia pestis* genomes reveal plague in Britain 4000 years ago. *Nat Commun* 14, 2930 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-023-38393-w>

The other paper reports on a case of Turner Syndrome (caused by aneuploidy, an abnormal number of chromosomes) discovered in one of the individuals from the shaft. It was published in January 2024: Anastasiadou, K., Silva, M., Booth, T. *et al.* Detection of chromosomal aneuploidy in ancient genomes. *Commun Biol* 7, 14 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-023-05642-z>

Library

Staffing

Two new members joined the team during the year (Ruth Pascoe and Juliet Faith) bringing the total to six apart from the Librarian. Juliet has sadly had to withdraw following a family bereavement, but we hope that she may return later in the year. The newcomers have been initially checking the inventories in boxes of non-bound material – of Somerset and Wells respectively. There is still room for two more assistants.

New titles added

[last year's totals are in square brackets]

Total additions: 41 [63 – included titles expelled by National Trust from Coleridge Cottage.] Of the 41 titles, 13 are additional to the Coleridge Archive and 1 to the Arts and Crafts section.

Use of Library for study

Signatures: (90) (many repetitive: e.g: Nicolas Brown 27, Clare Blackmore 15, Mark Hutchinson 5). [Last year: 61].

Outside visits to Library:

- (a) Former Old Deanery Garden Helpers: to view the Turner book collection.
- (b) South West Heritage Trust's Local Studies Librarian Kate Parr to visit the Library and meet the library volunteers.
- (c) Visitors to see the Platten Scrapbooks.

Exhibition

The exhibits recorded in last year's report include: the albatross mounted specimen; Captain Cook's second voyage; William Wales and the sea snakes; Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1800 edition & attempt to exclude *Ancient Mariner*).

Wells City Archives

Wells City Archives has had a busier year of enquiries in 2023, with a rise of 62% compared to the previous year. There was also an increase in the number of in person visits to the archive as we welcomed researchers interested in the waterways of Wells, architectural plans, billeting information, and those researching the history of their properties, or relatives who lived in Wells, amongst others. The City Archives also hosted a small number of tours showing a collection of interesting medieval and post medieval documents for parties such as the U3A Latin group. The environmental conditions best suited to preserve the collection were maintained with regular monitoring of temperature and humidity also. The City Archives is grateful to Isabel Billing who volunteered her assistance with monitoring and maintaining the best possible environmental conditions during her summer break from university, and with research to support archive enquiries.

Work on the Petty Sessions database by Austin Little has now been completed, providing a summary of cases held in the collection. The cases fall between the years 1822 and 1899 and show a really interesting side of what life was like in Victorian Wells for many. The Petty Sessions were the lowest level of court cases at the time, and tell tales of drunkenness, traffic offences and bad language amongst others. The project was led by the former City Archivist Dr Julia Wood and was assisted by a number of volunteers to produce the database, which will be released online via Wells & Mendip Museum's website in early 2024. The City Archives is very grateful to Dr Wood and all the volunteers who worked on the project. Austin Little's expertise in producing the database deserves a special mention also, as without his contribution, the project could not have happened. Work on Scrasebase, a database compiling information from Tony Scrase's card indexes, continues. The project has once again been led by Dr Julia Wood and it will be a brilliant resource of particular interest for anyone researching the history of medieval properties of Wells.

The exhibition displays in the Town Hall have also been updated throughout 2023. The Coronation of Charles III featured in the displays and there was also a focus on the previous coronation celebrations held in Wells over the past 120 years. The City Archives is grateful to David Walker for providing photographs for many of these displays from the museum's collection. Other Town Hall displays featured the history of the Bandstand and the upcoming Petty Sessions database. The City Archives was also pleased to support some of the museum exhibitions produced by Victoria Northwood as part of the Search & Learn project. Items for the exhibition on the Wells Pageant of 1923 and the exhibition of the history of Wells City Band were retrieved from storage, including a framed colourful embroidery and a number of interesting letters between the Wells City Band and Wells City Council.

Finally a number of community deposits to the archive have been documented. This has included a collection of programmes showing theatrical productions, supporting documents collected by a former Mayor of Wells, and a collection of photographs showing civic occasions from the mid-20th Century. The City Archives is very grateful to Mike Baker for his assistance with this last collection, including valuable contextual information for the photographs, which has now been recorded. The support the City Archives receives from community donations, current and former residents of Wells,

researchers sharing information, and from volunteers generously providing their knowledge and time is greatly appreciated and we are very thankful for everyone who has given their support in 2023.

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.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Website visitors	5,601	8,374	8,712	9,945	9,286
Facebook followers	630	935	1,696	2,018	2,059
Instagram followers	230	880	1,129	1,228	1,375

Website visitors fell slightly from the previous year. It may be that the figure for 2022 was extraordinarily high post-pandemic. Both Facebook and Instagram figures show steady growth.

In May through the Search & Learn project, consultant Genevieve Owen to provide a social media content plan for the project. The museum now has a system to build capacity and was given guidance on best practice.

Building, Garden, and Shop

In March, during the renovation of Balch's Study, a mediaeval doorway was discovered in an interior wall. It is hoped that in a future project the doorway can be revealed on the far side so it can be seen by visitors. During the renovation the wonderful fanlight casement window above the exit door has been uncovered.

In August changes were made to the central heating system to heat the Exhibition Room, museum Office, and Attic rooms from the main boiler, which allowed the decommissioning of the second old boiler in the museum Office. Having one boiler is more efficient and cost effective.

Many areas of the museum received attention by the Building Maintenance team during the year, including the Attic corridor and the Shop, but their main work was to prepare and redecorate the new Wells Galleries and Balch's Study. Wells Gallery One had not received attention for decades and required considerable attention, during which the covered fireplace was revealed and refurbished. In Balch's Study they revealed the attractive fan casement window in Balch's Study previously covered over.

Work in the garden by Norman and Marianne Adams and the garden volunteers has continued. They have created a new seating area under the yew tree, and the successful Open Day and plant sale in June generated funds to buy new benches and chairs. The garden team are to be congratulated for winning the Wells in Bloom Gold award in the commercial category. The museum garden has looked absolutely beautiful throughout the year.

Sustainability

All spotlights in the Reception and Shop have been replaced with LEDs which will reduce the electric usage. The thermostats in the Lecture Room and Geology Gallery have been upgraded to allow more effective central heating control.

Outreach and Collaborative Working

Wells and Transatlantic Slavery - Histories, Perspectives and Legacies: Throughout the year the museum has continued to contribute to this group. A conference was held at Cedars Hall in March to share current work, and a city trail and website have been created which feature the museum building and relevant collections:

<https://wellsandtransatlanticslavery.com/buildings/wells-and-mendip-museum/>

A small group enjoyed a visit to Sherborne Museum in May where we were made very welcome by their Chair, Curator, and volunteers.

In September as part of Heritage Open Days we offered several behind the scenes 'sneak peek' tours of the new galleries.

Throughout the year 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 including *Wells City Shops and Businesses*, and *Tea Drinking* reached 145 people across 9 residential homes and care settings. Plans are well underway to deliver four different presentations during 2024, including *Art & Handycrafts*.

Through a wider funded project the Windrose Rural Media Trust has provided three films of local interest which the museum can use in our interpretation and learning programmes:

- Compton Martin village in the 1940s (then and now)
- Changing Wells
- Farming during the hard winter of 1963 at Westbury sub Mendip and Priddy.

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, 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*.

The museum has continued to work with the SWMD Visitor Insights programme.

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 2022/23, your museum had 23,729 visitors.

Wells and Mendip Museum's Economic Impact of Visitors figures 2022/23:

Local Visitors: £144,396

Day Visitors: £367,553

Total Economic Impact of Visitors to the Local Economy: **£511,948**"

(source: SWMD annual museum survey)

Finance

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from Elizabeth Hawkes, Hinton Blewett Local History Society, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Wells City Council, Wells Freemasons, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society, and also an anonymous donation.

2023 was a remarkably 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 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