

# **Curator's Report 2021**

## **Governance and Management**

The Board currently comprises nine Trustees:

Sue Isherwood - Chairperson  
Marilyn Cattell - Treasurer  
Clare Blackmore  
Martin Grass  
Richard Lovegrove  
Jenny Rust  
Philippa Threlfall  
Andrew Webb  
Joseph White

David Walker and Sue Isherwood joined Martin Grass and Allen Cotton as Holding Trustees. David Walker continues as Honorary Curator, and Christine Fewer as Museum Manager. Philip Porter and Jonathan Chivers are the regular museum caretakers. Work was resumed on the initiative to convert museum governance to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, and we are grateful to consultant Vicky Dawson for her advice and assistance over this.

## **Covid-19**

The museum reopened its galleries to the public on 18<sup>th</sup> May following sterling efforts by Richard Lovegrove and the Building Maintenance and Gardening teams to prepare the building after the long third lockdown. We were successful in recruiting sufficient new Front of House volunteers to reopen, firstly for three days a week, then five. We are grateful to Christine Fewer for coordinating the recruitment and to Jon Chivers for on-the-job training.

## **Exhibitions and Activities**

Sadly, due to the pandemic, some of our exhibitors were forced to cancel. However, we did host art exhibitions from Michael Brobson, Brian Luker, Joeby Slight and Robin Gray. A sculpture display by Martin Cody & Tony Martin, and embroidery & textile exhibitions from Avalon Stitchers and Irving Embroideries. We also featured an installation created by the Imagine, Learn & Create students entitled "Temple Ferrago".

*The Somerset and Bath Lunatic Asylum 1848-1918* exhibition opened in June and was a huge success. Clare Blackmore reports:

"I would like to thank Richard and his crew for their immense help in setting up the exhibition and getting the room ready for the displays and the Friends of the Mendip Hospital who have funded the project. Also thanks to St Andrew's Press and D.H. James who have both done some amazing printing "at cost" which has helped a great deal.

This is the culmination of two year's work by Hilary Walters, Pete Jaggard and myself and we have discovered some amazing stories and I hope dispelled many of the long held myths of the treatment of mental illness in a Victorian Asylum. Research is ongoing and The Bishop's Palace would like to stage the exhibition in 2022 when we will present a slightly different slant focusing on the

homeopathic/whole-body treatment of mental health patients to tie in with their garden.”

The Samplers display: When the Sampler Room was refurbished in 1986 standard size mounts and frames were used to allow the display to be easily changed, to both offer visitors new selections, and also to limit the exposure of the vulnerable samplers to display conditions. We are grateful to volunteers Sarah Villiers and Gill Pettit for their expertise in making a new selection for 2021 and planning two future rotations that will allow the most interesting and informative samplers to be seen. The new selection involved the reframing of four samplers already mounted, and two samplers needed for the next rotation were professionally mounted. Thanks are due to Sarah Villiers and Richard Lovegrove for fundraising for this.

In August the museum mounted a temporary display of five Plaster of Paris castings of Cathedral stone carvings in support of the Gormley Project (see Outreach & Collaborative Working). Made for the 1851 Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace. Also on display are the tools and equipment of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century master stonemasons at the Cathedral, David Rice.

Sadly the Wells Young Archaeologists’ Club has decided to stop meeting for now, as the national YAC body stipulates the need for three designated organisers.

To celebrate Somerset Day on the 11<sup>th</sup> May we hung the Somerset flag from the ‘battlements’ above the side entrance to the museum.

In November we held a very successful Christmas craft market, with 15 stalls selling all sorts of handmade Christmas gifts and treats. Despite storm Arwen, it was well attended and raised around £250 for the museum.

A Christmas craft day in December, where families could spend the day making different Christmas decorations, brought the year’s activities to an end.

### **Search & Learn Project**

In June the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) confirmed updated Approved Purposes and revised Budget for the project, and in September we were given permission to start. I am most grateful to Melita Armitage our consultant for revising the activity plan and budget. We advertised for a project manager in October, and I am very pleased to say we have appointed Victoria Northwood to the position, and we can look forward to an exciting few years delivering a programme of high quality and lasting benefit to the museum.

### **Learning**

This year Volunteer Learning Officer Hilary Walters worked with four local primary schools to provide Loans boxes on the topics of WW1 Remembrance, WW2 evacuees, village history and Wells High Street. Hilary has also worked with a pre-school group focussing on the EYFS Curriculum topic *Understanding of the World*. Together with her team of volunteers she has also participated in the Wells Heritage Partnership Antony Gormley Workshop (see Outreach & Collaborative Working). We are grateful to Hilary and her team for this important work which is at the core of the museum’s purpose.

## **Collections**

This year 75 items, or groups of items, have been accessioned into the collections. 33 of these were newly acquired material, and 42 were items already in the collections but not previously documented to current standards.

In addition to new accessions we also benefited from the return to the museum of two long-standing loans of palaeontological material.

## **Documentation and Research**

We are grateful to the Collections team Joan Goddard, Richard Kilroy, Allen Cotton, and Steve Tofts for their sterling efforts, as well as David Dawson, Theresa Hall, and Linda Iveson of the Wells Pottery group, for working on the collections between lockdowns. There are currently 30,195 records in the museum 'database'. Work continues both adding new records, and also rationalising duplicate records.

Studies continue on human remains excavated from Charterhouse Warren Farm Swallet (collection 2004.1). Rick Schulting, Professor of Scientific and Prehistoric Archaeology at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford, has obtained C14 dates for nine items, and has also arranged for these items and others to be the subject of DNA sampling by the Crick Institute. Hopefully the results will be published during 2022.

The human remains excavated by the Westbury Society at Furlong Farm, Westbury-sub-Mendip, which were C14 dated to c.505 AD, have also been the subject to DNA sampling by the Crick Institute and the results are awaited (collection 2018.63).

In June we published another booklet in the museum's occasional series. Researched and written by Sarah Villiers and Joe White, *Traditional Manufactories and Plant Nurseries of Wells* tells the stories of the past 'industries' for which Wells was renowned. These included knitted hosiery, which even Daniel Defoe remarked upon. Mostly the work of women, as hand knitters (or 'needlers'), the men involved were more likely to use mechanical knitting frames. Wells also produced a wide range of brushes. Up to 150 different brushes were made for different purposes and with different materials. Another traditional manufactory was the making of paper which still continues in this area. It was once a thriving activity both in Wookey Hole and also in Dulcote. Finally, significant plant nurseries flourished on the outskirts of the city. Having moved out to Coxley, Brownes, the one remaining family nursery, continues to provide excellent service. The booklet presents many details on each of these means of employment, which show that Wells was not just a market town, but also a busy manufacturing centre meeting the needs of its time.

Wells Old Almshouse: At the time of her death Jean Imray was researching Wells Almshouses for a publication, and Jean's literary executors were entrusted to finish the work. The pandemic provided the opportunity for Julia Wood to work on this and the museum will publish *Wells Old Almshouse* early in 2022. The publication will be a limited edition which we will deposit in relevant specialist libraries, with the text available at no charge as a PDF download on the museum's website.

China Comes to Wells project: Following an application to Arts Council England by Vicky Dawson, David Dawson and the Wells Pottery Research Group received a grant of nearly £15,000 for a project to study and report on the Chinese ceramics from the Wells

Museum Garden excavations. Their findings will also eventually be the subject of a temporary exhibition at the museum. David and other members of the group begun this work in May.

Stone carvings: During the Autumn we hosted Leicester University work placement student Jaye Harrison who researched the larger stone carvings on display around the museum, mostly in the garden. Jaye's Stone Trail is available at Reception for visitors to use. We are grateful for her input.

## **Library**

### Library team departures

Sarah Villiers, who has left Somerset, created several library exhibitions, and was joint author of the museum's much admired handbook on our historic samplers, including some not on display. Eric Preston, who came in 2017 from being Chair of Dartmouth Museum, also leaves after five years in the team. His *History of High St Shops* from 1700 is still on sale in the museum shop, besides being used with school's educational visits. Eric has also compiled an inventory of fifteen scrapbooks created between 1925 and 1943 by the sister of Frances Underhill, Bishop of Bath and Wells (1937-1943). More recently Eric has written articles in the library's occasional paper series: *The MPs of Wells* (from Medieval times) and the newly complete *Roman Somerset*.

### New titles added

Square brackets show Coleridge Archive volumes:  
2021: 44 [10]; (2020: 42 [20])

### Recorded research sessions

2021: 30; (2020: 17) NB impact of Covid.

### Newspapers

Our collection of historic newspapers has been extended by copies of the Wells Journal from 1998 to 2013 saved when the press left Wells.

### Exhibitions

2020-2021: World War 2 and "Blast from the Past" (Women at War)  
2021-2022: Books and visual material from the Coleridge Archive.

Stuart Andrews, Honorary Librarian

## **Wells City Archives**

Considerably less was achieved during 2021 because of the impact of coronavirus. The City Archivist was on furlough throughout the beginning of the year. She returned to work on 3<sup>rd</sup> May.

On her return, a key priority was to check the condition of the most important items in the historic collection. She is extremely grateful to the Curator for keeping a regular check on the environmental conditions in and security of the Museum Strong Room while she was on furlough. This year the Museum invested in a new dehumidifier for its Strong Room. It is contributing considerably to the control of temperature and humidity in there.

Another significant priority for the Archivist on her return to work was starting to catch up with the enormous backlog of Archives enquiries which had accrued since the onset of the pandemic. Her volunteer Assistant, Jonathan Chivers, has been of invaluable assistance in this.

On Government advice to prevent the spread of Covid-19, Wells City Archives was closed to the public from 17<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The City Archives Reading Room re-opened on a limited basis to visits by members of the public in October 2021, with protocols to ensure its safe operation.

Throughout the period of the pandemic, significant work by volunteers continued to take place on several important volunteer Archives projects. The Archivist is immensely grateful to the dedicated Archives volunteers whose generous contribution of time and effort has made possible a vast amount of progress during an extremely difficult time. When the Archivist was on furlough, she participated in some of these projects on a voluntary basis, in some cases managing them, in others, contributing material or editorial skills. The major projects were:

- “ScraseBase” (a database of Wells property histories as researched by Tony Scrase) – Development work on this project continued. We are now at the stage of reviewing the database for consistency, queries raised, and accuracy. The next stage will be to prepare the database for release online for free consultation by members of the public. Many of the sources for this database are contained in the City Archives.
- The Patrick Brown Slide Collection – Work also continued on identifying and listing this large collection of slides of Wells properties. Historic photos of Wells shopping streets from the collection will be included in a collaborative exhibition with the Museum in 2022.
- Petty Sessions – Work proceeded on adding to the database the details covering the final part of this rare nineteenth-century collection.
- Jean’s Imray’s book entitled “Wells Old Almshouse” – Jean Imray, the first City Archivist and former Museum Trustee, sadly died in 2015 without completing her book. Work began on editing her text, then unfortunately stalled, but happily it restarted in January. The Archivist voluntarily edited, typeset, sourced illustrations, and coordinated the completion and printing of it. The book will be published by the Museum and will be released in two formats. There will be a limited number of printed deposit copies plus a PDF release (downloadable for free from the Museum’s website). It will be launched in 2022 and the Archivist will promote it.

Finally, other Archives news. Wells City Archives is participating in the Wells and Transatlantic Slavery Working Group spearheaded by the Cathedral’s Chancellor. On 20<sup>th</sup> November the Archivist displayed two medieval charters and the Convocation Book dating from 1450-1553 at a meeting of the Wells branch of the Richard III Society. She has created several displays at Wells Town Hall, on the early history of the Portway Annexe; the Honorary Freedom of the City; and the recipients of the two new Freedoms which were given in November – the Wells Branch of the British Legion and Councillor Norman Kennedy. She also gave the citation for the British Legion at the ceremony. In response to an invitation to contribute a piece to Wells Heritage Partners’ brochure about the city, she wrote the section on “The Water of Wells”.

Dr Julia Wood, Wells City Archivist

## Website and Social Media

The museum's social media programme proved to be invaluable during the pandemic, providing interesting content for our supporters, and maintaining the profile of the museum when it could not open. We are most grateful to Joe White for his work developing and maintaining the website.

	2019	2020	2021
Website visitors	5601	8374	11,494
Facebook followers	630	935	1696
Instagram followers	230	880	1129

Joseph White reports:

"Website visits increased to 11,494 in 2021, up from 8,374 in 2020. This growth was driven by more website content (such as two new Virtual Exhibitions), key museum activities (such as *The Somerset and Bath Lunatic Asylum* exhibition), and the relaxation of lockdown rules attracting visitors and exhibitors back. Website numbers also benefited from our more established social media presence and external relationships (such as with Visit Somerset). Indeed, referrals from other websites and social media increased by 30% from 2020."

## Building, Garden, and Shop

Many areas of the museum received attention by the Building Maintenance team during the year. The Statuary redecorations were completed in January, the front door was refurbished, and the small office off the Trench was repurposed for our Learning Officer. We have carried out works to reduce both our running costs and our carbon footprint. Building maintenance team laid considerable amounts of insulation in the roof voids, and our electrician replaced about sixty fluorescent tubes with LED units. We are most grateful to Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society for funding these improvements.

Following a huge amount of work by the Norman and Marianne Adams and the garden team the refurbished garden was introduced to friends and volunteers on two garden open days on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> May. We are grateful to the Old Deanery Garden group for financial support for garden refurbishment. Throughout the year designing and planning the new mural for the garden has taken place. This is community initiative led by Trustee Philippa Thelfall, and will feature three figures that have made significant contributions to the heritage and wellbeing of the City: Bishop Beckynton, Dean William Turner, and the museum's founder Herbert Balch.

We are very pleased to report that Volunteer Shop Manager Jan Whittaker is now in post. With help from Jenny Rust, Marilyn Cattell and the Building Maintenance team the Stock Room has been redecorated and reorganised.

## Outreach and Collaborative Working

In August the Antony Gormley statue *Doubt* was installed on the West Front of Wells Cathedral for a period of 18 months, and the museum is working with the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, and the Project Factory on a series of events and activities around the installation. Wells Heritage Partners published a booklet *Heritage Wells: An Introduction to the Historic Sites of Wells*, in which the museum features. Hilary Walters worked with

other Wells Heritage Partners education officers to develop a very successful Gormley learning offer to schools.

**Wells and Transatlantic Slavery - Histories, Perspectives and Legacies:** The museum is a member of this group of institutions and individuals which was established this year. Members have an interest in the historic links between the City, her institutions and her citizens with the transatlantic trade in enslaved peoples. The group aims to share research and coordinate projects for mutual benefit.

### **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. As mentioned earlier we have concentrated our efforts on our website and social media to engage with our audiences, and we have continued to participate in the *Promoting our Museums with Visit Somerset* project.

### **Finance**

During the year the museum gratefully received grants and donations from Wells City Council, Mendip District Council, Wells Natural History & Archaeological Society, and the Medlock Trust.

2021 was a most challenging year, but we managed to achieve so much through the expertise, determination and teamwork of our sixty plus volunteers. 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 them all.

David Walker,  
Honorary Curator