

The Friends of Somerset Archives

Newsletter (number 2: April 2005)

Welcome to this the second newsletter for the Friends of Somerset Archives. Our membership is growing! We now have 72 members, and we are also pleased to announce our first fund raising venture. One of our members, Paul Mansfield, has very kindly photographed and indexed an early Somerset newspaper (more details can be found in this edition) which we are selling copies on cd-rom for £4.00 post free to the U.K, and £4.60 overseas. Please keep the contributions for the newsletter flowing in.
Adrian Webb, Hon. Editor

Social event and a look behind the scenes at the Somerset Record Office

The first meeting of members of the Friends of Somerset Archives took place on the evening of Monday the 24th January at the Record Office in Taunton. The purpose of the visit being to have a look behind the scenes and learn how the office functions to give the service that the public demands but often takes for granted.

After a greeting by the Chairperson the talk was handed over to Liz Grant to tell us some of the history and purposes of the office. She told us how Somerset had the first archive repository in the country which was established at Wells Cathedral in 1619. The records were later transferred to other places for storage including Wilton Gaol and Shire Hall. It was in 1958 the Somerset Record Office, as we know it today, was first opened and again Somerset can claim the lead, in that it was the first purpose built record office.

Turning from the building Liz then went on to tell those assembled about the type of documents held, dating from the 8th century to 21st century. Most of the people using the office today use church records and we were shown some of the more unusual entries such as the burial entry for William Pick of Pilton who was struck by lightning whilst tolling the bell at the funeral service of the Vicars wife. In addition to church records we were told that there were records relating to the great and the good of the county, such as the Luttrell and Poulett families, criminal records and those of the poor all of equal importance.



**Viewing records in the Conservation suite at
Obridge Road.**

**The conservation staff are responsible for
repairing and restoring the records at Taunton.**

After this excellent talk we were split into two groups, one with Liz and the other with her colleague Esther, and then taken into the strong room to see how all of the documents that we use are stored on the five miles of shelving as well as being shown some of the treasures of the office including an 8th century charter. From the strong room we were taken to the conservation area and shown some of the miracles that are performed in this department. The evening ended with coffee, biscuits and lots of discussion. The whole trip can be summed up by a comment that was made a few days after the event, "What a pleasure it was to listen to two young ladies whose passion for their subject was so enthusiastically displayed" and that they will "never complain again when a document takes ten minutes or more to arrive". An enjoyable and informative evening was had by all.

Report sent in from Bernard Welchman.

Records of various types are deposited on most days with an average of eight new deposits each week ranging from a single record to many boxes. As well as storage of the historical archives of Somerset the main function of the office is to make these records available to the public and with the publicity of various television programmes such as "Who Do You Think You Are" they are becoming busier all of the time. Last year the repository produced 20,000 original documents and around 65,000 microfilmed records with well over half of visitors working on their family history. In addition to work carried out at the Office itself a service is also provided to North Somerset when an Archivist visits various libraries each week. Education is also another important part of service and is carried out by offering advice to schools, giving talks to classes and compiling packs to be used in the National Curriculum.

NEWS FROM OUR LATEST MEETING

David Hawkings gave the Friends of Somerset Archives a very interesting talk on the records at Kew (now The National Archives), at the Taunton Museum on Tuesday 22nd March. He explained that he had spent some time at Kew, whilst living in London, researching various projects including a book he has written on Fire Insurance records. He has also been researching his family history and that has led him to find out about these different records, some of which Kew were unaware of! Small wonder when you understand the tremendous number and variety of records at Kew date from 11th Century up to the present day

He was only able to touch briefly on the records he had brought to show us but entertained us with accounts from the Treasury, the Audit Office, Exchequer Records and Ministry of Health records. The subjects covered included a wealth of information. He was able to indicate some of the records to search; for instance if one was researching the history of a farmhouse use the Inland Revenue Tithe Maps and Apportionments and the National Farm Survey of England and Wales 1938 and the 1910 Valuation Office and maps as a starting point.

For those people researching genealogy the PCC (prerogative Court of Canterbury) records at Kew contain originals of wills which may have seals and are certainly signed. These have to be ordered before going to Kew because they take some time to locate in the many miles of documents stored there. Some, however, can be accessed via the Internet for a small cost, but these are the office copies and do not contain the signatures or seals.

It was also very interesting to learn a little about life in the country from 1689 to 1839 via some excerpts from the Exchequer Records which includes lists of Army deserters, tax defaulters, men pressed into the army, muster rolls etc. These records are arranged by county and have no index to names or places!

Membership Secretary Bernard Welchman gave grateful thanks for such an informative talk and mention was made of the visit by the Somerset & Dorset FHS to Kew, should any of the Friends wish to accompany them.

Many thanks to the Museum staff for facilitating this excellent talk. The next event for the Friends is a visit to Nether Stowey and Coleridge's cottage led by the County Archivist Tom Mayberry on 4th June. Further details are available on the web site

www.friendsofsomersetarchives.org.uk

Report sent in from Anne Leamon

NEW ACCESSIONS AT OBRIDGE ROAD

January

Additional parish documents for Frome St John, Frome St Mary, Frome Christ Church, Milton St Peter with St Jude, Wilton, and Barrington.

Additional parish council documents for Hutton PC, Sampford Brett PC, Fivehead PCC.

Additional non-conformist documents for Bridgwater Westfield United Reform Church.

A\CJS, M/1560 – Photograph albums of Anne White of Taunton, travels around the world, 1963-2003.

D\D\cf, M/1562 – Faculty plans, 1989-1992.

A\CJU, M/ 1568 – Prescription books from a chemist in Yeovil, 1941-1944.

DD\SLI, M/1572 – Additional Somerset Light Infantry papers.

A\AZF, M/1579 – Index and scanned images of Norris' Taunton Journal, 1725-1727.

February

Additional parish documents for Bishop's Lydeard, Bradford on Tone, Weston super Mare All Saints with St Saviour.

Additional parish council documents for Pilton PC, Flax Bourton PC, South Cadbury PC.

A\CJX, M/1588 – Papers concerning early World War II radio operations in the South West, 1940-1941.

A\BWT, M/1592 – Additional papers relating to the Hochwald Trust set up after the Hochwald air disaster, 1973-1990.

A\CJY, M/1593 – Report on the West Somerset Mineral Railway project, 2004.

A\CJZ, M/1594 – West Coker School records, 1874-1911.

A\CKB, M/1597 – Prescription books of Mr Tripp, Bridgwater.

March

Additional parish documents for Churchstanton, Chaffcombe, Nynehead, and Langport.

Additional parish council documents for Paulton PC, and Goathurst PC.

Additional non-conformist documents for Bridgwater Westfield United Reform Church.

DD\DP, M/1615 – Churchstanton enclosure award, 1857.

A\CKK, M/1619 – Correspondence and background papers concerning the Shapwick village study and excavations, 1988-2002.

A\AGK, M/1626 – Papers of the Eastment family of Drayton, 19th-20th centuries.

D\DC\tau.d, M/1634 – Taunton UDC and Wellington RDC and UDC tenant records, Taunton market papers, 1820-1999.

Researcher's Labours - Norris's Taunton Journal

Paul Mansfield has very kindly sent in some extracts from Norris' Taunton Journal that he has indexed covering the years 1725 to 1727. The complete index along with images of this early provincial newspaper are available on one cd-rom from the Friends priced at £4 (including postage and packing). Below is Paul's introduction to his index to whet your appetite and encourage people to buy the cd! Copies are available in person from Bernard Welchman if you are in the record office at Taunton, or by post from the Newsletter editor.



One might well be excused for assuming that the earliest Taunton Newspaper was the Taunton Courier (first edition 22nd Sep 1808). However, more than 80 years before the first Taunton Courier came 'rolling off the presses' another Taunton newspaper made a brief appearance. It went under the title 'Norris's Taunton Journal'. A thin volume containing 66 editions still exists and is held at the Somerset Record Office. Though not generally viewable by the public it covers the period from 24th September 1725 to 29th December 1727. The 1725 editions are far from complete, though the next two years have a far more comprehensive coverage. This paper makes interesting reading and gives a good insight into current affairs of the time.

Each week includes a roundup of news from various European countries. The headings give an interesting description of the location of each town. The Hague is described as 'the finest village in Christendom in the Low Countries', Hamburg is 'a vast strong city of Denmark' and Petersburg, 'a town of Muskovy near the Finnick Gulph in the Baltick Sea'. Superstition was clearly prevalent both in Britain and further afield. Jeboult tells a story from an earlier edition of this paper which presumably no longer exists: Madrid, May 1st 1725 - A certain holy sister, having prophesied that the five principal towns of Spain should be destroyed by fire from heaven, the people were in terrible alarm, and the court ordered public prayers. More curious perhaps are the sworn statements from a number of French fishermen as to the sighting of a Merman off Brest. What they did encounter is open to speculation though their attempts to hit it over the head would not go down too well with today's conservationists. They eventually let it go for fear of it dragging their boat under the waves. Another amusing case involves Mary Toft of Godalming, wife of a clothier by the name of Joshua. Her claim to have given birth to rabbits brought her great notoriety. Sadly, her fame was short lived and ended with a stay in Tothill Fields Bridewell when the whole affair was discovered to have been a hoax.

Unusual deaths from around the country were also a great source of interest. Poor John Workman, a husbandman from Worcestershire was found dead in a field with his 'privy parts cut off'. One can only speculate as to whether this was some sort of revenge killing. Perhaps he had taken too many liberties with an angry farmers daughter. A more bizarre story of death is that of the widow Crabb of North Bradley near Trowbridge. Locals had wondered why she had not been seen for some time. Sir Philip Parker's steward was sent to inquire as to her welfare. The family said she was in bed and did not wish to be seen. After some persistent questioning on the behalf of the steward she was discovered dead in a coffer. There she lay 'double with all her flesh wasted away'. No foul play was suspected. The family's excuse was that they had not buried her 'because they loved her so well'. A more likely explanation is that the lease on the house was in her name and that her death could have meant eviction for the rest of the family.

A large percentage of the newspaper's stories came from London. The most popular were probably the stories of murderers held at Newgate prison. The case which must have generated the most gossip was that of Catharine Hayes. The story starts when a decapitated head was found by a cowkeeper in Tottenham Court Road. It was soon identified as that of John Hayes. Catherine (his wife) and two accomplices were arrested and the gruesome details of his death were printed as they unfolded. Thomas Billings a Worcester tailor and Thomas Wood, a Worcester butcher were found guilty of assisting Catharine in the murder of her husband and were sentenced to death. Thomas Wood died in the condemned hold before his sentence could be carried out while poor Catharine was strangled on the gibbet and burnt. A most unpleasant end but excellent subject matter for an editor keen to sell his newspapers.

More extracts will appear in the next issue.

Projects by the Friends at the Somerset Record Office

Index to photographs in the Somerset Light Infantry collection.

Work is progressing on this project based on the collection held at Obridge Road. It may be possible for the photographs to be filmed and issued on cd-rom along with the index – this is being looked into.

Tithe apportionment transcripts.

Copies of the apportionments are made available on cd-rom allowing volunteers to work at home - there are many transcripts in preparation. If you are interested in helping please contact Bernard Welchman. If we all help a little we will soon have achieved a great deal.

Forthcoming Events

4th of June (Saturday) **Literature and Local History : Nether Stowey, Coleridge and Wordsworth by Tom Mayberry.**

This event will start at 11 o'clock at Coleridge's cottage at Nether Stowey, followed by lunch for which you will have to make your own arrangements, then at 2 o'clock a tour of the village. There may be a charge for the visit to the cottage and cream teas will be available afterwards (the price for cream teas will be made at cost). Again if you wish to come please contact the membership secretary to make sure there is still enough room.

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Autumn (To be arranged for a Saturday) **Somerset Archives at Longleat House by Dr Kate Harris.** Numbers are limited so once again it will be on a first come first served basis. If you wish to come please contact the membership secretary to make sure there is still enough room. This is an excellent opportunity to examine a wealth of Somerset's history accrued by the Lords Bath over several centuries. More details will be posted as soon as they are available.

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December **Christmas Social and Quiz.** It seems a long way off but we are planning this event well in advance to make it a worthwhile outing to celebrate the first year of the Friends of Somerset Archives. More details will be posted as soon as they are available.

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If you have any ideas for any visits, talks or activities please can you let the chairman know, whose address is at the end.

Please note that non-members will be charged at £3.00 per event.

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NEWSLETTER - Please note that this newsletter has been issued with the agreement of all of the committee who have the final say on all of the material published by the Friends.

* * * Don't forget that this is not only a group supporting the Somerset County Record Office but also other record offices in the historic county and also we are interested in Somerset records that are outside the county and not so easily accessible * * *