

Hon Archivist's Report, November 2023 – October 2024

The statistics for this period are as follows, with the corresponding figures from last year in brackets: total number of emails was down on last year 52 (71), telephone calls 2, (4), casual visits 2 (2), and visits by appointment 7 (3). This simple breakdown shows that emails still predominate and are mainly related to the local history of Abingdon and its environs.

Email enquiries covered diverse subjects: the Quaker burial ground in Ock Street, the cannon at the Crown and Thistle, the statue on the building facing the Market Place, and the early printing of a breviary at Abingdon Abbey. Permission to use a portrait of James Bertie did not present any problems as it featured on Wikimedia Commons. Information was sought on several buildings, in particular Stratton Lodge, the former offices of Abingdon Town Council and an old industrial outbuilding now converted into living accommodation in Abbey Close. I was also asked to explain the origin of 'Old Mayor's House'. This was the site of the house of Abingdon's first mayor, Richard Mayott, appointed in the 1556 charter.

Family history websites have reduced considerably the number of family history enquiries. Only three requests were received: Tomkins family who were prominent Baptists, the Simpson family, who were shopkeepers and registrars in the 19th century, and information on Charles Belcher, a brewer and wine merchant in the High Street.

Preparation for Heritage Weekend always brings requests for help. The Friends of Abingdon continue to produce themed guided walks and I was asked about brickworks in Abingdon and photographs of pubs not in copyright.

Visitors to the archives have sought information on the history of Stratton Lodge, opening of the inner relief road, the registration of canal boats which was one of the duties of the borough surveyor in the 19th century, and suggestions re the significance behind motifs on an old girl guide banner. I was also visited by a member of the Friends of St Helen's Church looking to book a future lecture though no date was fixed.

I have also been able to help with several enquiries received by the town council's reception staff. A particularly interesting one concerned the Compton organ formerly in the Abbey Hall which provided the music for dancing and concerts. I have also collaborated with Jo Blackmore to provide a booklet on the Guildhall for the

Heritage Weekend, checked an information sheet on the Roysse Room and provided information on honorary freemen. I was also involved in a small way with the local development plan.

Cooperation continues with staff at Abingdon County Hall Museum. I have been able to answer several queries referred by Elin, the Collections Officer, and the Manager, Dan Sancisi. Arranged through the Museum was an interview with Bethan Nimmo of Radio Oxford to discuss local feelings when north Berkshire became part of the new county of Oxfordshire in 1974. Elin and I are trying to keep in touch regularly.

In the Muniment Room the map collection has now been listed and the old Corporation files, re-housed in the boxes purchased through the Berkshire Record Office, have been transferred to the Muniment Room. A new small 2-drawer plan chest has been acquired which sits on top of the large plan chest. The Conservation Officer has also given advice on protection of the old cemetery books. I am very grateful to Mark Stevens and his staff for their advice and support.

Unfortunately, reorganisation at Newsquest has seen the demise of the 'Heralding the Past' column in the Abingdon Herald. I had been a regular contributor since its inception and had two articles in the pipeline. I emailed the new regional editor, Andrew Colley, as instructed by my contact, but he did not reply.

Finally, I would like to thank the Town Council staff for all their help and assistance.

Jackie Smith

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Hon. Archivist.