

Bedfordshire Archives



Annual Report 2022/23





Bedfordshire Archives Annual Report, 2022/23

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1. Introduction

Bedfordshire Archives began in 1913 under Bedfordshire County Council. From then on it provided a public archives service, corporate records management for semi-current files and legal documents, for the county council and its successors - Luton Borough Council, Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. Bedfordshire Archives is hosted by Bedford Borough Council but serves the other two Bedfordshire unitary authorities under service level agreements.

2022/23 was a year of consolidation for the archive service. Researchers continued to be accommodated on site on an appointment only basis with morning and afternoon sessions and closing at lunchtime, which has been the pattern since the pandemic. The service returned to offering external outreach activities and it was particularly pleasing to be able to welcome a number of school groups during the autumn term. Although the Records Management service had been separated from the archive service in 2021 the archive service continued to provide some seconded support to the records service throughout the year.

The service first became accredited under the national archive accreditation scheme in 2016. Accreditation lasts for six years before a full reapplication is required. An application was submitted at the end of 2021/22 and Bedfordshire Archives' accredited status was confirmed in July 2022. The confirmation letter said 'The Panel were pleased to make the second award of Archive Service Accreditation to Bedfordshire Archives, which they recognised as a well-managed archive service meeting national standards.'



2. Staff

In April we were pleased to welcome Natasha Kikas to the role of part-time archivist.

From September to the beginning of January we hosted an intern on the DFN Project SEARCH programme run in partnership with DFN Project SEARCH, Bedford Borough Council, Bedford College and Mencap. The supported internship aims to help young people with learning disabilities and autism to access work experience as they transition from education to work. Adam LeBon (far right) worked with us for 10 weeks.



Work Experience and Volunteers

We are always thankful for the work of our volunteers. This year they gave an amazing 2,880 hours to the service and completed several large long-standing projects.

The cleaning, checking and repackaging of the Bishops Transcripts (ABT) was a great achievement. Identified as needing doing in a survey nearly thirty years ago, work began in 2018 and was almost complete when the pandemic halted progress. The two volunteers created the first detailed listing of the surviving returns of baptisms, marriages and burials submitted to the Bishop by individual parishes between 1600 and 1812 and were able to identify some previously unidentified parchments and place them in the correct parish. Their work makes the collection much easier to use.

Another long-term project has been to create a simple listing of our main collection of wills (ABP/W) on our online catalogue. This was begun with kick-start funding from the Bedfordshire Family History Society in 2018 and was then continued by a group of volunteers. Following the pandemic one volunteer returned to the project and completed the last box just before Easter 2023. The availability of the online catalogue has resulted in increased requests for copies and in person access to the wills.



Work experience students and volunteers have helped clean records from World War One.

Over the year volunteers also worked on:

- Providing content for our community archive webpages on Carlton and Chellington.
- Repackaging and cleaning various collections.
- Ongoing cataloguing of: ABM, BTNeg, FDB, SL, QSR, X928.

We have an average of 18 volunteers at any one time. Many volunteers stay with us for a long time, but there is some turnover. In July and August we were joined by a recent graduate wishing to gain some work experience before going travelling, In September one volunteer left to go to university and another left to studying archive administration as a post graduate. In autumn two new volunteers joined us and one former volunteer returned.

In May 2022 we provided a week of work experience to five students from Bedford 6th Form College; a further three students spent a week with us in March 2023.

3. Accommodation

Although our building has served us well for over 50 years, accommodation remains a challenge and this was recognised in the key findings and required actions of the Archive Service Accreditation panel in 2022.

‘A lack of suitable quality storage for expansion...remains an issue...an increasing percentage of material is outstored...this is far from comfortable – the service spends much time on stores management’

Required/improvement?	Requirement number(s)	Details
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1 Required action	1.4	As part of wider council accommodation reviews, ensure that the needs of the archive service for appropriate standards and space for storing the unique heritage collections are fed into planning.
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We continued to move some boxes to an out store. The boxes moved are all of collections on restricted access due to data protection legislation, making more room on site for records likely to get regular use.

4. Collections

New Accessions

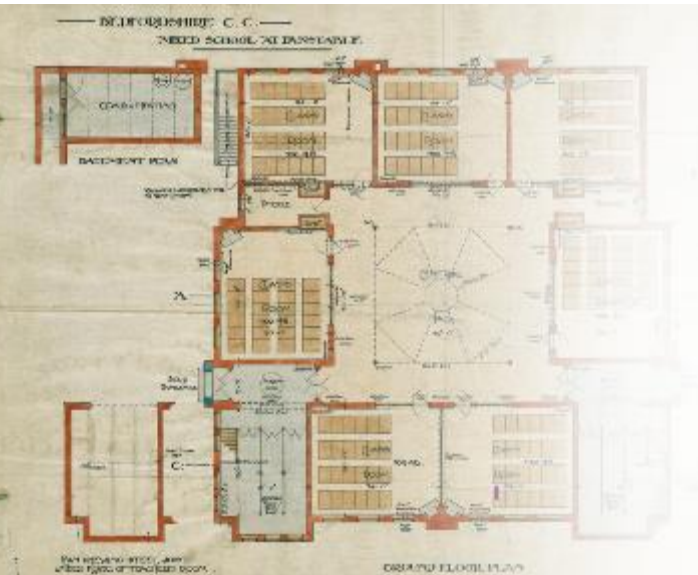
91 accessions were received during the year. This included an important set of 15th century Luton title deeds, which we were able to purchase at auction due to a generous donation from a private individual.

Deposits included:

- Bedfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes (X939)
- Bedford Borough Council minutes (BorB and UB)
- Bedford Guild House (Z1787)
- Bedford Coffee Pot Club (X1043)
- Renhold parish church (P32)
- Keysoe Row & Thurleigh Baptist church (Z1801)
- Keysoe parish records (P48)
- Oral history recordings and transcripts re. Bedford industry (X1041)
- Biggleswade Trinity Methodist church (MB)
- Wrestlingworth school (SDWrestlingworth)
- Shuttleworth Trust (SL)
- Meppershall Church of England School (SDMeppershall)
- Biggleswade Trinity Methodist Church (MB)
- Maulden parish council (PCMaulden)
- Leighton Buzzard Quaker meeting (FR)
- John Roland Herbert of Clophill family papers (Z1773)
- W Reginald Steel, architect, additional material (Z558)
- Luton title deeds (Z1803)
- Photograph album of The Hyde in World War Two (Z1804)
- Luton Borough Highways department (BorLHi)

We welcome new material that meets our collecting policy and we are particularly keen to receive material that reflects all the communities and diversity of the county and fills gaps in our collections.





Cataloguing

30,223 catalogue entries were added to the online database.

Catalogue entries were added to 83 different collections. New cataloguing included: Bedfordshire County Council Social Services and County Architect's records; Bedford Borough Council minutes and papers (BorB), Luton Borough Council highways department photographs (BorL), Dalton of Upper Dean family papers (Z1669), Dunstable material (X929 and Z1362), Toddington Music Society (X1005), Luton Voices oral history transcripts (X214/12), Luton Ramblers (Z1165).

Support for our cataloguing software will end in January 2024 so this year some time was spent understanding the options and process required for the migration of the catalogue to new software.

Catalogues are published on our online public access catalogue <http://bedsarchivescat.bedford.gov.uk>

Conservation

818 items passed through the conservation studio, which included: 41 volumes, 21 maps, 195 documents, 204 illustrations, 333 bespoke enclosures. Repackaging projects were undertaken on parts of 10 different collections. Items were mounted for one exhibition.

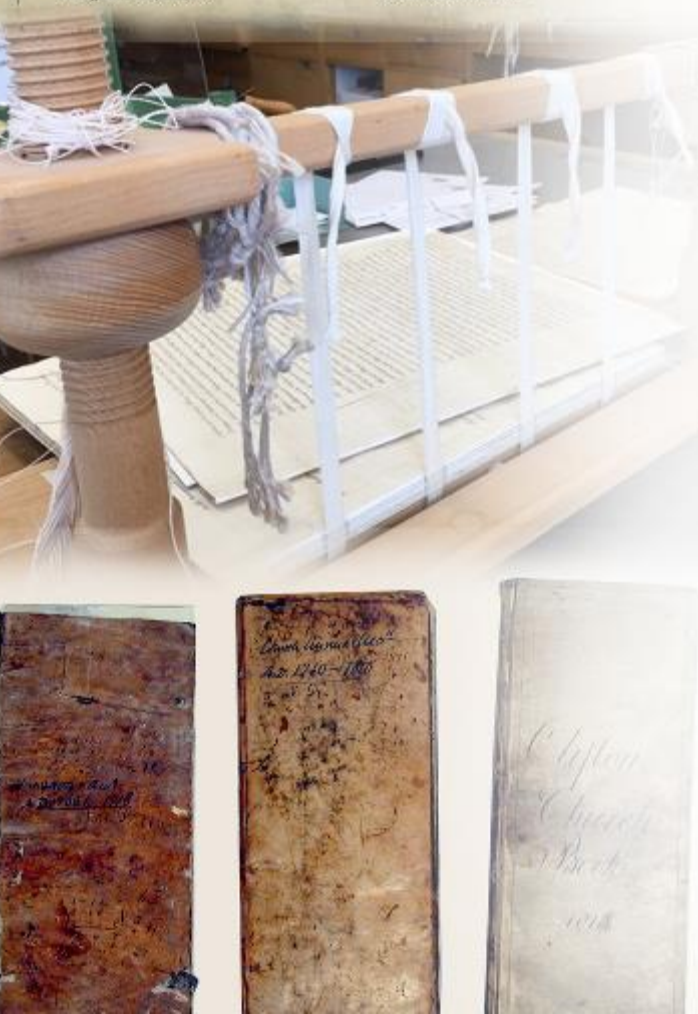
As part of the ongoing work on the Bedfordshire Press negative collection, the conservator developed a new technique for safely separating historically damp-damaged fused glass plate negatives and a method for temporarily stabilising broken glass plate negatives with a view to permanent repair being made possible in the future. The 19 large, heavily used, vellum-bound clerk of the peace's enrolled enclosure award books were cleaned and repaired to ensure they are fit for the rigours of future access.

Volunteers completed the repackaging of the Bedford Borough planning application plans 1860-1948. Due to their format these plans have always been awkward to produce – the new packaging method makes it easier to identify the correct bundle and protects the plans from wear and tear.

Digitisation

Preliminary discussions were held with the three major online publishers of family history material over a possible digitisation project and survey work was carried out by our conservator in relation to this.

Digitisation of collections produces digital files that need to be looked after. In addition new collections are increasingly being created and received in digital formats. The Archive Accreditation panel report included the required action to 'Continue actively to seek to embed preservation of digital assets of long-term significance into council information governance processes, enabling the service to continue its heritage mission into the digital context.' This year we continued to work towards introducing an appropriate solution.



5. Public Access

The number of visits to the office was 537. This is a significant rise from the previous year as we continue to recover from the pandemic (397 in 2021/22, 59 in 2020/21). 144 of our visitors were carrying out research for work e.g. land use surveys, and 76 for academic study e.g. PhD thesis.

The number of documents retrieved from the stacks for visitors and enquiries was 11,665 (9,094 in 2021/22 and 2,157 in 2020/21).

Staff answered 897 enquiries that required detailed advice or research (compared with 1,075 in 2021/22). We continue to encourage people to use our website and search our catalogue before contacting us.

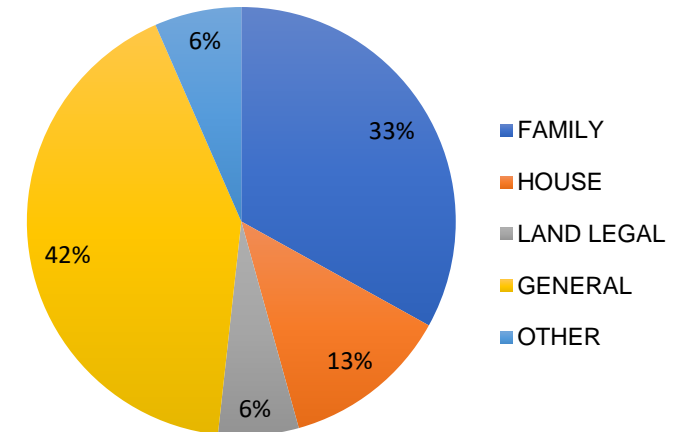
We seek and listen to people's views and monitor and respond to feedback.

No negative comments were received during the year, although five people were quick to tell us when our online catalogue was unavailable due to an unexpected error. While working to get the online system restored we helped the researchers by carrying out searches for them and by sending catalogues in alternative formats. The catalogue was restored to working order within 48 hours.

Recorded feedback included:

- Thanks from volunteers and work experience placements for enhancing their skills: 'Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work on these records. It has given me confidence to look at manorial records in researching my own family.' 'the practical experience you guys gave me has definitely helped to put it all in context. I'm constantly reflecting on it in my coursework...'
- Thanks from groups and schools: 'really enjoyed our visit to the office and have written it up in the parish magazine'; 'Thank you for a brilliant afternoon. The pupils were so full of it afterwards'; 'We all thoroughly enjoyed it and it has inspired the girls to find out more about the history of maps'; 'The visit has got students thinking about what they are given to study for Black History in schools and how we need to think about it, and be creative in finding ways to address this.'
- Comments from researchers re. online catalogue: 'use online catalogue almost every day to help put flesh on the bones of answers to family history queries'; 'better than other archives'; 'very impressive and incredibly accessible'
- Comments from in person visitors: 'I've been to a lot of archives lately and this is the best, good catalogue online, very well organised, staff helpful, got through 100s of documents much quicker than expected so only need to visit for two days rather than a week'; 'My visit was made even more rewarding by your welcome'; 'This has been fantastic – what a pleasure and wonderful service, kind staff and knowledgeable'.
- Comments from remote enquirers: 'Thank you for your time, service and diligence related to this matter, the clarification is most helpful'; 'The service was excellent'; 'What a wonderfully useful and comprehensive message, thank you so much not only for the speed of your response but the huge weight of uncertainty it has lifted from my shoulders.'

Subject of research



Online presence

The number of page views of our website totalled 313,893 (402,061 21/22, 564,762 20/21; 423,779 2019/20). Our online catalogue had 298,837 (320,688 21/22, 352,850 20/21; 307,887 2019/20) views. Our resources on *Ancestry* had 1,065,817 (1,149,687, 2021/22), (1,260,181, 2020/21; 916,631 2019/20) views. The gaol database received 19,258 views (22,919 in 2021/22) and 24,122 via a link from Ancestry.

- On our website of general information, guides to sources, on-line newsletters, exhibitions and community histories pages, we updated guides and continued work to make the navigation easier.
- We added pages to our detailed information about places in Bedfordshire. These included pages for: Carlton, Chellington and Ravensden school. We continue to welcome contributions from volunteers.
- At the end of the year 97.5% of our catalogues were available online via our online public access catalogue. Entries are added and edited every day.
- Our database of 55,345 transcribed entries of the Bedford gaol registers c1760-1905 remained popular.
- You can find us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube where we aim to engage with national events, inform about our collections, and explain how to use the service.

The screenshot shows the homepage of the Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service. At the top, there is a banner image with the text 'Home Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service Welcome'. Below this, a navigation bar contains two buttons: 'Search Our Catalogues' and 'Visit Us Appointment Required'. A sidebar on the left lists 'Community Histories' with sub-links for letters A to Z. A map of Bedfordshire is labeled 'Community Histories'. At the bottom, a search navigation bar includes tabs for 'SEARCH', 'RESULTS', 'DETAILS', 'SELECTION', and 'SEARCH HISTORY'.

The screenshot shows the 'Bedfordshire Archives Service Catalogue' page. It features a welcome message: 'Welcome to the on-line catalogue of Bedfordshire Archives Service. This enables you to search our archive catalogue or our searchroom library catalogue. We strongly advise you to read the help files available to ensure the best results. There are general help files to the left of each screen, or specific help by clicking a field.' Below this, a note states: 'Please note that this database does not yet include catalogues of all our holdings. Researchers should therefore contact us for further information.' A paragraph explains that images are produced with permission and are intended as an indication only. The page title is 'Bedfordshire Archives Service Catalogue'.

Bedfordshire Gaol Register

database contains entries from gaol registers held by the Bedfordshire & Luton Archives and Records Service (BLARS). Level of detail varies between registers but each entry gives some of the following details of the criminal: name, age, hair colour, height, crime, dates of committal arrest and means of disposal e.g. release, death, transportation etc. The database presently covers the period between 1801 and 1879 (was updated on a weekly basis. Our aim is to add the details from all the surviving County Gaol and House of Correction registers held at Bedford 1801 - 1901, an approximate total of 35,000+ entries.

to enter your search criteria. You must complete at least one field. Gaol records will be matched against the exact spelling of the criteria have any queries please [contact us](#).

Year From:	<input type="text"/>	Year To:	<input type="text"/>
First Name:	<input type="text"/>	Last Name:	<input type="text"/>
Age (earliest):	<input type="text"/>	Age (latest):	<input type="text"/>
Gender:	<input type="text"/>	Trade or Occupation:	<input type="text"/>
Birth Town:	<input type="text"/>	Birth Country:	<input type="text"/>
Residence Town:	<input type="text"/>	Residence County:	<input type="text"/>
Offence:	<input type="text"/>	Sentence:	<input type="text"/>



The screenshot shows the Instagram profile for 'bedsarchives'. The profile name is 'bedsarchives' with a verified badge. It shows 201 posts, 384 followers, and 168 following. The bio reads: 'Bedfordshire Archives. We are the archives service for the historic county of Bedfordshire. Enquiries to archives@bedford.gov.uk or bedsarchives@bedford.gov.uk'. Below the bio, there are three image thumbnails from the profile's posts.

Outreach

- We made monthly contributions to the Leighton Buzzard Observer.
- We delivered nine talks to groups and organisations mostly in person, but some by Zoom or Teams. We hosted three group visits to the office.
- We published newsletters in summer 2022 and winter 2023.
- We provided two new resource packs to schools and made our old packs available to the schools' library service enabling schools to request packs via their service.
- May - we attended Leighton Buzzard market as part of the town council's celebration of 10 years of running the market.
- July - we provided an activity and staffing for the Heritage Bedford stand at the Bedford River Festival. Trainee Bedford Tour Guides visited the office as part of their training; later in the year the tour guides requested a number of images from our collections to show during their newly developed tours.
- September - we began a programme of talks and workshops at Flitwick Library and Luton Central Library. Unfortunately these events lacked support and some had to be cancelled, but for those that went ahead the reception was positive.
- October - students from Bedford Free School's history club visited to find out how an archive service works; the mayor of Bedford came to meet staff and volunteers; we ran a children's activity at The Higgins, Bedford as part of the half term programme.
- December - we contributed decorations for the Heritage Bedford tree at the St Paul's Christmas Tree Festival. The theme this year was musicals, we chose *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and based our decorations on our collection of Meltis catalogues.
We welcomed four classes of year 5 from Bedford Girls' School who were investigating maps as part of their work on explorers and exploring, and a class of students from Samuel Whitbread Upper School, Shefford who were undertaking projects investigating themes in Black History. In preparation for this latter visit we completely reviewed and revised our Ethnic source list, which we first published in the early 1990s.
Bedfordshire Historical Records Society published *The Turner Letters*, based on material from our holdings.
- January - one of the archivists ran classes at two local schools.

6. For more information

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