

Bedfordshire Archives



Annual Report 2023/24





Bedfordshire Archives Annual Report, 2023/24

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1. Introduction

Bedfordshire Archives began in 1913 under Bedfordshire County Council. It provides a public archives service and 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.

2023/24 was another year of change for the archives and records service. In June, after two years in different departments, the records management service was reunited with the archive service. Meanwhile the first steps were taken to combine the Archives and Records team with the Libraries Hub team that provides central services for Bedford and Central Bedfordshire libraries. The ongoing restructuring of the department limited our capacity to take on new volunteers, but otherwise the year was business as usual.



2. Staff

From May to July 2023 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 access work experience as they transition from education to work. Our intern, Ash, helped us with research and with cataloguing small collections.

In October the county archivist took on the role of team leader archives and libraries hub as the first phase of the joining of the two teams.

Work Experience and Volunteers

We are always thankful for the work and support of our volunteers. This year they gave an amazing 3,270 hours to the service.

A milestone was reached in June with the completion of the cataloguing of the architectural drawings in the Franklin, Deacon and Briars collection, architects of Luton (FBD). Work began in 2015 and a number of volunteers were involved in the sorting and cataloguing of the 3,224 drawings.

Our summer newsletter celebrated the work of our volunteers. It featured articles written by volunteers and was all about projects they have been working on and, in some cases, recently completed. The projects featured were: Shuttleworth (SL) cataloguing; cleaning and sorting Bishop's transcripts (ABT); packaging Bedford Borough plans (BorBP); listing the wills collection (ABP/W) and the Franklin, Deacon Briars collection (FDB). It was particularly good to hear about what volunteering means to the volunteers. After the newsletter was published we received a letter from someone who had been a volunteer with us in the late 1990s, explaining that the newsletter helped keep him in touch with the archive service as he remembered his time with us fondly and was always sorry he had to give up his voluntary work with us.



Over the year volunteers also worked on:

- Providing content for our community archive webpages on Carlton and Chellington, and Bedford High Street.
- Repackaging and cleaning and sorting various collections.
- Ongoing cataloguing of: ABM, BTNeg, QSR, X928, RDBP.
- making decorations for the Bedford Christmas Tree Festival.

We had an average of 18 volunteers at any one time. Many volunteers stay with us for many years, but there is some turnover. This year we did not have the capacity to take on any new volunteers who did not already have experience of working in archives, but we welcomed back two former volunteers and one new volunteer with a records background.

In June an undergraduate spent two weeks' work experience with us and in July we provided a week of work experience to two year 10 students from local schools.

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 outstores, making more room on site for records likely to get regular use. The boxes moved are all of collections on restricted access due to data protection legislation.

4. Collections

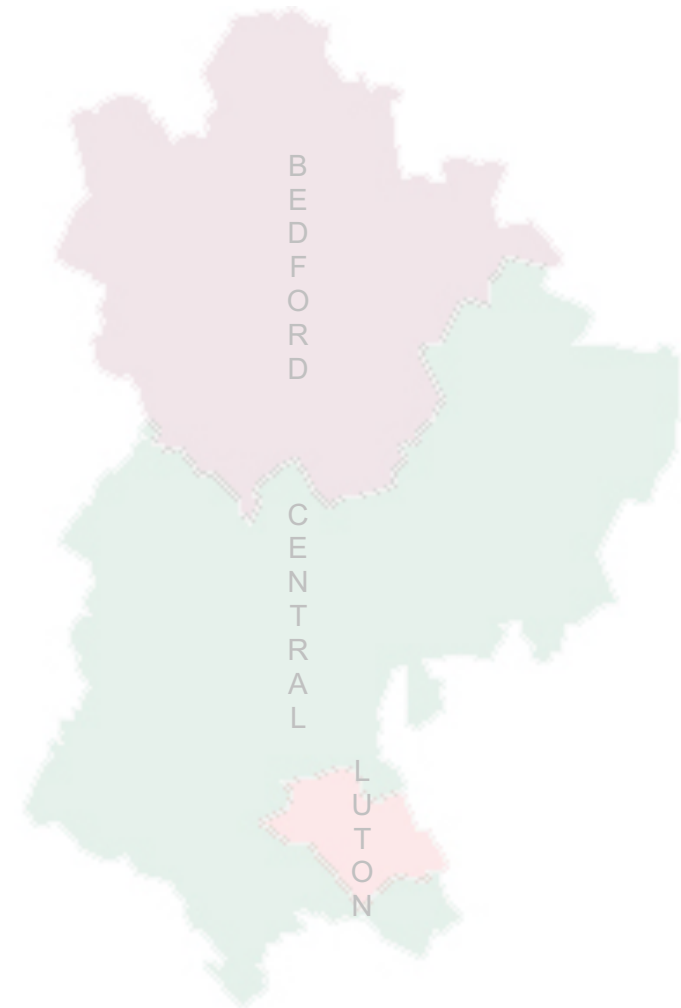
New Accessions

69 accessions were received during the year.

Deposits included:

- Bedfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes (X939)
- Magistrates Court registers (PS)
- Coroners' Inquest papers (Co/Inq)
- Letters and papers of the Longuet Higgins family of Turvey (HG)
- A L & G Abbott, funeral directors of Kempston (X1031)
- Locomotive Club of Great Britain Bedford branch (X1048)
- Bedford Morris Men (X1051)
- Bedford Fine Companions Folk Dance Group (X960)
- Carlton & Chellington, Thurleigh and Wymington parish councils (PC)
- Bedford MENCAP (X682)
- Sandy Town Council (TCSandy)
- Lucas of Wrest Park (L)
- Campton, Shefford and Meppershall parish churches (P)
- Tempsford Methodist Church (MB)
- Bert Blinco, photographer of Leighton Buzzard (Z1820)
- North Herts and East Beds Sailing Club (X1052)
- Luton Borough Council (BorL)
- Luton and Leighton Area Meeting of the Society of Friends (FR)
- Luton poor law rate book (Z1830)

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

19,884 catalogue entries were added to the online database.

Catalogue entries were added to 121 different collections. New cataloguing included: Bedfordshire County Council Social Services and County Architect's records; Bedford Borough Council minutes and papers (BorB), Bedfordshire Coroner's inquest files (Co/Inq), Lucas of Wrest Park (L); Henman glass plate negatives (Z1075), and additions to Alington estate archives (AN). We also concentrated on clearing the backlog of records from schools including: Luton High School for Girls, Denbigh Road Schools, Denbigh High School, Dallow Primary School, Brewers Hill Dunstable and school governor's minutes of Alban Middle School.

Support for our cataloguing software ended in January 2024 and during the year we worked towards the procurement of a replacement.

Catalogues were published on our online public access catalogue

<https://bedsarchivescat.bedford.gov.uk>

Conservation

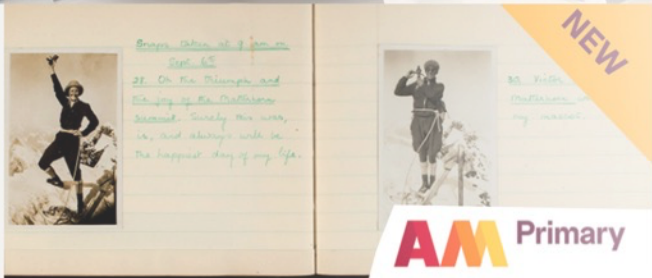
1,479 items passed through the conservation studio, which included: 34 volumes, 175 maps, 793 documents, 77 illustrations, 394 bespoke enclosures. Repackaging projects were undertaken; repackaging of the AD, WW1 and WW2 collections was completed and BML and RGH continued. Work on the BTneg collections led to the development of a quick way of stabilising and containing broken glass negatives using thin Japanese paper. The deposited railway plans from the 1840s to the 1880s were cleaned, repaired, packaged and the storage reorganised to make the collection easier to produce to researchers. The backlog of volumes requiring conservation was tackled and plans from CA20 were repaired in parallel with cataloguing. Work continued on plans from the FDB collection and maps in various collections. The conservator's favourite task of the year was stabilisation of X170/1/2 – the log book of HMS Leviathan in 1805 – including the log entry relating to the battle of Trafalgar.

An exhibition about Conservation at Bedfordshire Archives was on display in our reception area for the last six months of the year.

Digitisation

AM digital contracted Townsweb Archiving to digitise material from our collections for their academic resource *Women's Voices and Life Writing 1600-1968*. Copies of the images made were provided to the archive service for our use. AM released the publication on the 14 February 2024.

New collections are increasingly being created and received in digital formats. This year we continued to work towards introducing an appropriate solution to embed preservation of digital assets of long-term significance into council information governance processes.



Women's Voices and Life Writing, 1600-1968

5. Public Access

The number of visits to the office was 673. This followed the trend of being a significant rise from the previous year as we continue to recover from the pandemic (537 in 2022/23, 397 in 2021/22). 151 visits were for research for work e.g. land use surveys, and 62 for academic study e.g. PhD thesis.

The number of documents retrieved from the stacks for visitors and enquiries was 12,156 (11,665 in 2022/23, 9,094 in 2021/22 and 2,157 in 2020/21).

Staff answered 912 enquiries that required detailed advice or research (compared with 897 in 2022/23). 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.

People generally commented on the helpfulness of staff. Other positive feedback included:

- 'I think I have gone as far as I can now and it is much further than I thought possible at the beginning...I have enjoyed being an amateur detective for a while'
- 'the community stories pages are an amazing idea, good on you for starting them up...a family member forwarded me the link...I was amazed to see a whole page dedicated just to Pulloxhill' (message from New Zealand).

An undergraduate who was with us for two weeks of work experience wrote up her experience on Linked In saying 'It has been fascinating to see a range of historical documents from Latin and deeds to school logbooks during WW2, and I have been inspired by the archivists who work so hard to catalogue and preserve these so that they are accessible for all...'

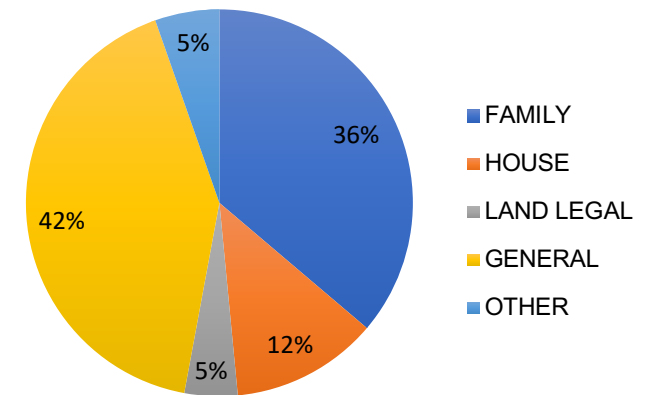
A depositor on receiving the final receipt and reviewing the catalogue wrote to say 'Seeing this catalogued and listed as you have done has made my day! All the sorting out of my husband's research is a mammoth task and this has made it worthwhile.'

We were contacted regarding racist language in an article on our website. The article was originally written in 2008 as part of a series to mark the anniversary of the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, but some of the language used then is no longer considered acceptable and the correspondent considered the tone of the article offensive. We undertook a thorough review of the series of articles based on current best practice and all of the archivists discussed and agreed changes. The correspondent was kept updated with our proposed action and progress and within a week we had supplied a revised text and updated the website. The correspondent expressed satisfaction with our response and commended our expediency and seriousness in rectifying the issue.

We were notified of a data breach via one of our catalogues having been incorrectly published on the National Archives' Discovery. We immediately acted to remove the catalogue and to check that the problem was not replicated on our own online catalogue.

A homeowner requested that we remove a page from our Community Histories because they felt that it was causing them harm. We reviewed the page and, while the information given about the property was not inaccurate, we could see why it might have an impact on the current owner. Rather than remove the page we suggested a revision to the text and this solution was accepted by the homeowner.

Subject of research





Home

Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service

Welcome

We are the County Record Office for Bedfordshire. Anyone may use our service and the archives we hold for research either in person or remotely. We are based in Riverside Building, Borough Hall, Bedford.

Search Our Catalogues

Visit Us
Appointment required

Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service

Community Histories

Community Histories A to B

Community Histories C to D

Community Histories E to H

Community Histories I to P

Community Histories R to S

Community Histories T to Z



SEARCH RESULTS DETAILS SELECTION SEARCH HISTORY

Bedfordshire Archives Service Catalogue

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.

Please note that this database does not yet include catalogues of all our holdings. Researchers should therefore [contact us](#) for further information.

Images attached to descriptions are produced with the permission of the copyright holder whenever it has been possible to trace them. If you believe that we have published an image without permission please contact us. Images are intended as an indication only; we may be able to supply high quality images on request, please contact us. Catalogue descriptions and transcripts are copyright of Bedfordshire Archives Service.

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 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 from 1801 - 1901, an approximate total of 35,000+ entries.

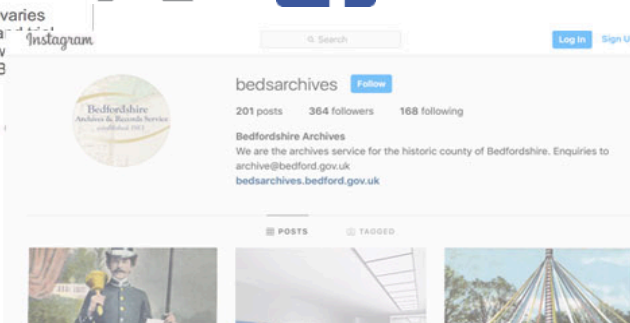
to enter your search criteria. You must complete at least one field. Gaol records will be matched against the exact spelling of the criteria. Have any queries please [contact us](#).

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"/>

Online presence

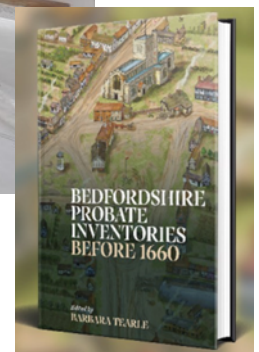
The number of page views of our website totalled 431,539 views (313,893 22/23, 402,061 21/22). Our online catalogue had 355,943 views (298,837 22/23; 320,688 21/22). Our resources on *Ancestry* had 926,038 views (1,065,817 22/23; 1,149,687, 2021/22). The gaol database received 21,217 views (19,258 22/23; 22,919 in 2021/22) and 18,835 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 properties on Bedford High Street. We continue to welcome contributions from volunteers that use the archives as the basis for their research.
- At the end of the year 97.8% of our catalogues were available online via our online public access catalogue. Entries are added and updated every day.
- Our database of 55,345 transcribed entries of the Bedford gaol registers c1760-1905 remained popular.
- We still have X(Twitter), Facebook, Instagram and YouTube accounts. In 2022/23 we tried to increase our social media usage, but in 2023/24 changes in the way that social media and scheduling platforms worked made this more difficult. We reviewed the amount of work involved in providing and monitoring social media content against the engagement it produced and decided that the return was not worth the effort required. Therefore in 2023/24 we scaled back our involvement to more ad hoc posts of service announcements and some national events. Our website and email remain the best way to find out about and contact our service.



Outreach

- We made monthly contributions to the Leighton Buzzard Observer.
- We published newsletters in summer and autumn 2023 and spring 2024.
- We delivered seven talks to groups and organisations mostly in person, but some by Zoom or Teams
- Three organisations arranged bespoke group visits to the office.
- We attended Dunstable markets history day, held as part of the town's High Street action zone project. Our stall told the story of the Dunstable peace dinner in 1856, which gave a meat and plum pudding dinner for poor residents of the town on the very spot where the 2024 market was held.
- Archivist, Natasha Kikas, led guided walking tours on the Woburn estate for the Bedfordshire Local History Association's spring event.
- We had a stand at the Luton Hoo Walled Garden Heritage Open Day event, where we explained the early Luton title deeds that we had purchased in January 2023 and which we had recently finished cataloguing.
- Archivist, Helen Bates, ran a short introduction to palaeography workshop at the office.
- We celebrated our 110th birthday by giving tours of the archives and records service to colleagues from other departments in Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire councils.
- We contributed decorations for the Heritage Bedford tree at the St Paul's Christmas Tree Festival. The theme this year was kings and queens and our decorations were based on the Great Seals of various monarchs that can be found within our holdings.
- In January one of the archivists ran three classes at a local school.
- In March we were pleased to receive the news that our application for an engagement grant from The National Archives had been successful. This will enable us to run an outreach programme in Central Bedfordshire in 2024/25.
- Bedfordshire Historical Record Society published *Bedfordshire Probate Inventories before 1660* which includes about 65 inventories from our collections.



6. Records Management

The Records Management team work for the internal departments of the three funding authorities. They receive consignments of paper records no longer needed on a regular basis by the creating department then manage the storage, retrieval, and, when appropriate, the transfer or destruction of these internal records.

We were delighted when, in June 2023, the records management service was reunited with the archives service after two years being in a separate department. We firmly believe that the two services work better together in ensuring that the records of the councils are well managed. In October tours of the records management and archives were run for Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire staff to explain the difference and connection between the two parts of the service and the importance to the councils of good records management.

The number of boxes received totalled 651 (compared with 319 in 2020/21). These came from Bedford Borough Council: 399; Central Beds Council: 92; Luton Borough Council: 60; shared services: 86, and 14 from academies. 615 boxes were securely destroyed during year.

The number of files requested back by departments totalled 327; 211 relating to Bedford Borough Council holdings, 75 Central Beds Council, 14 Luton Borough Council, 27 Shared services.

The service runs a deeds registry of title deeds, agreements, leases etc. for Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. 186 items were accessioned for Bedford and 142 for Central. Approximately 236 deed packets and files were requested back by departments during the year. In October Central Bedfordshire highways department took responsibility for supplying copies of highways agreements required by house buying searches in their area. This reduced the requests handled by the deeds registry to 106 for the year.

Not all of our semi-current files can be held on site, but, for speed of access and to keep costs down, we try to keep as many on site as possible. This year we were given permission to take over additional accommodation in Borough Hall. This involved clearing the room, which had been used for miscellaneous storage by various departments. Thanks to assistance from the building supervisors, this was achieved by the end of the year. The clearing of the room highlighted the need for proper records management. The majority of the material in the room was passed its retention period and could be destroyed; one department contacted about records we had found said that they had been looking for the records concerned for some time! One cupboard turned out to be full of obsolete storage formats, such as 5-inch floppy discs and VHS tapes, that can no longer be accessed without specialist equipment the council does not have – all these things could have been avoided if the correct records management procedures had been followed.

7. For more information

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