

Bedfordshire Archives



Annual Report 2024/25





Bedfordshire Archives Annual Report, 2024/25

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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.

2024/25 saw some staff changes and some exciting externally funded projects and outreach, but otherwise the year was largely one of business as usual.



2. Staff

In June archivist Helen Bates left the service to take up a post in Tameside, Greater Manchester. In November Tom Larnar, also left us to move north, this time to a post in Bolton, Greater Manchester. This was not a coincidence nor a great surprise; Helen and Tom became engaged to each other shortly after they were both established in their new posts. We of course wish them well in their careers and their future together.

Our part-time archivist, Natasha Kikas, moved into the full-time role left by Helen. We were then fortunate to be able to recruit to the part-time post and the full-time post left by Tom. We were particularly fortunate to recruit two archivists who had previously worked for our service, which meant our new archivists were able to quickly settle down to work. Rachel Bates had been an archivist with us from 2014-2018 before taking a career break; she returned as our part-time archivist from November. Rebecca Marsh began her archives career becoming one of our volunteers in 2015 while studying for her archive qualification by distance learning. Rebecca also worked as a casual reader support officer for us in 2016. More recently Rebecca worked full-time for another department of Bedford Borough Council, but always kept in touch.

In August one of our part-time cataloguing assistants, Mark Humphreys, lost a long battle with cancer. He is much missed.

Work Experience and Volunteers

We are always thankful for the work and support of our volunteers. This year they gave an incredible 4,200 hours to the service.

As well as our regular volunteers this included two weeks' work experience placements for six graduates who were considering archives as a career and a placement for someone interested in conservation as a career.

We had an average of 19 volunteers at any one time. During the year we welcomed back one former volunteer and one new volunteer and said goodbye to one volunteer who left to study archives at university and one volunteer who left to take up an apprenticeship. Sadly, we said goodbye to a volunteer who had been with us for 11 years, but who felt unable to continue.

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: ABP/A, BTNeg, QSR, X928, RDBP.
- Cataloguing of ABM, which has now been concluded, and various other small collections.



Left to right archivists Rebecca, Natasha and Rachel

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
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.



We continued to use outstores, making more room on site for records likely to get regular use. Another large deposit of magistrate court registers received under the Public Records Act went straight to offsite storage as these bulky records have restrictions on access.

4. Collections

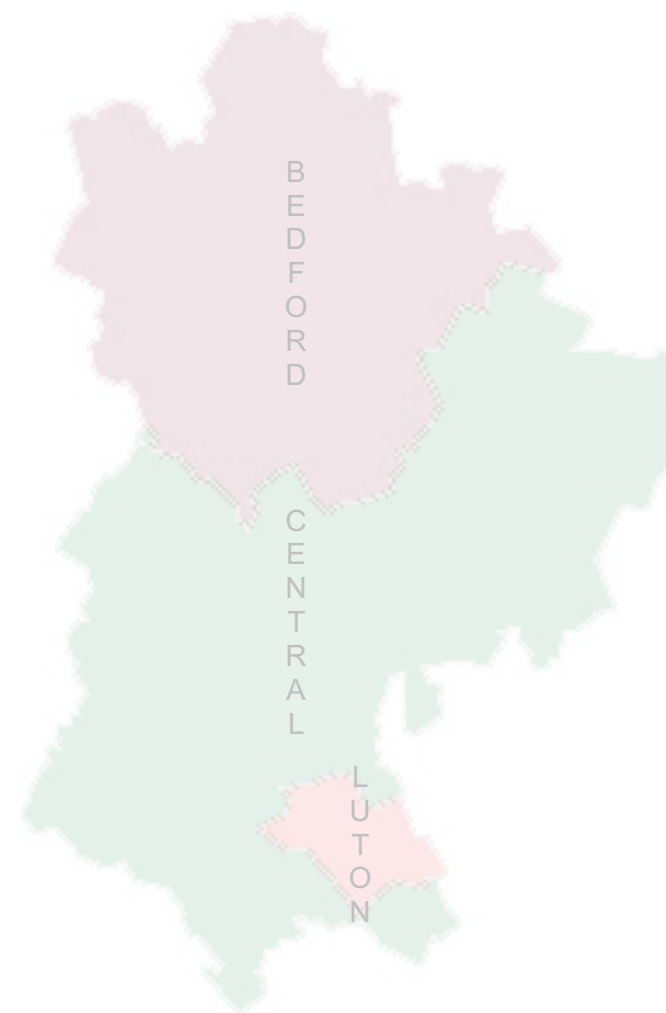
New Accessions

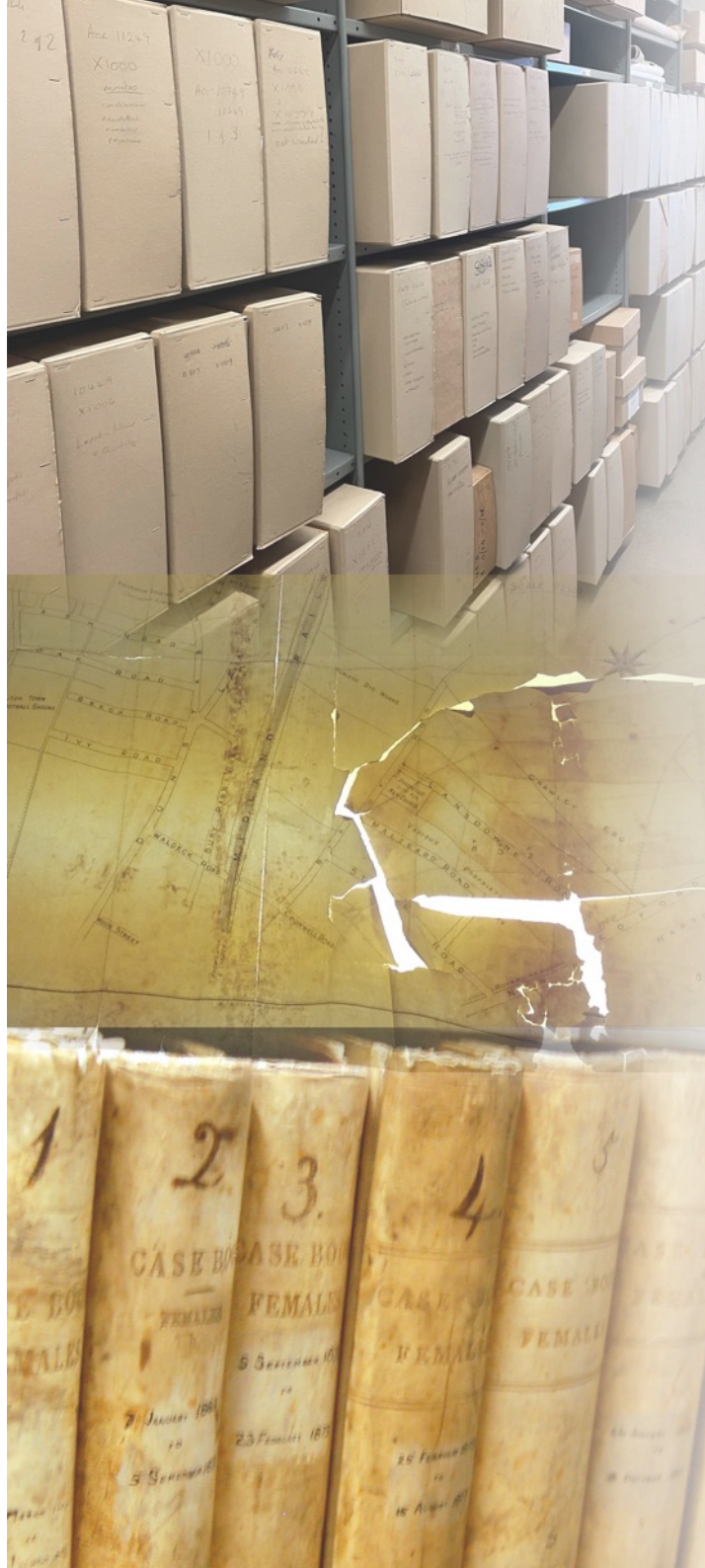
96 accessions were received during the year.

Deposits included:

- Bedfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes, X939
- Magistrates Court registers, PS
- Bedford Choral Society, X817
- Biddenham Wives, P74/28/11
- Carlton Village Hall, X1054
- Cranfield Village Hall, X990
- Cople and Willington schools (Sheerhatch Primary)
- Kempston East Methodist church, MB
- Correspondence of Sir Albert Richardson of Ampthill, RGH
- Deeds from Biggleswade History Society, X758
- Harlington Heritage Trust, Z628
- Henlow Conservation Society, Z1838
- Gladman family Studham Manor farm diaries, Z1850
- Woburn benefice, P118, P42, P15, P102 and P124
- Robert Bloomfield Society, Z1712
- Luton Central Library, BorL
- Luton Central Evening Townswomen's Guild, Z1569

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

30,547 catalogue entries were added to the online database.

Catalogue entries were added to 115 different collections. New cataloguing included: Bedfordshire County Council Education department and County Architect's records; Bedford Borough Council minutes and papers (BorB), Luton Rural District Planning application plans (RDLP); family papers of the Longuet-Higgins family (HG).

We carried out a stocktake of our cataloguing backlog, revised priorities and identified material that volunteers will be able to help us catalogue.

99% of our catalogues are published on our online public access catalogue <https://bedsarchivescat.bedford.gov.uk> and entries are added and updated daily.

We continued to work towards the procurement of a replacement for our cataloguing software.

Conservation

1,048 items passed through the conservation studio, which included: 59 volumes, 547 maps, 66 documents, 42 illustrations, 316 bespoke enclosures. Repackaging of RG4 continued and packaging of RDLP was started. As well as the conservation of material identified as a priority by colleagues, work continued on plans from the Franklin, Deacon and Briars architects' collection (FDB), maps and volumes.

Projects

With funding from the Bedfordshire Family History Society, we undertook a project to create an index of case notes for patients of Three Counties Asylum 1860-1912. This project has given us a greater understanding of the contents and survival of the records and will improve efficiency in responding to enquiries.

One of our volunteers has been working on a project run by The National Archives to precis the out letters of some English and Welsh poor law unions in the 1840s. The Bedford Poor Law Union out letter books PUBC1 are a potentially useful, but rarely explored, source. This project will make the content easier to access and researchers will be able to find out similarities and differences across the country as content is added to The National Archives Discovery portal.

5. Public Access

The number of visits to the office was 605. 23% of visitors identified themselves as researching for work e.g. land use surveys, and 10% for academic study e.g. PhD thesis, the rest were for personal interest.

The number of documents retrieved from the stacks for visitors and enquiries was 11,977

Staff answered 787 enquiries that required detailed advice or research (compared with 912 in 2023/24). We continue to encourage people to use our website and search our catalogue before contacting us. In December we changed the method for recording our enquiries. The new enquiry system enables customers to submit their enquiry by form, which should help us to monitor enquiries more effectively.

We seek and listen to people's views and monitor and respond to feedback. We were notified of one technical problem with our online catalogue that is still unresolved, but which we hope will be rectified when we upgrade our cataloguing software. Apart from this all feedback received during the year was positive. It included:

- Very productive, 5-star rating
- I couldn't have asked for more
- My best archive visit to date
- I stumbled on your website and spent hours browsing just for fun
- Incredible 3 days, found so much for my thesis and thoroughly enjoyed my time
- Friendliest office visited

Online presence

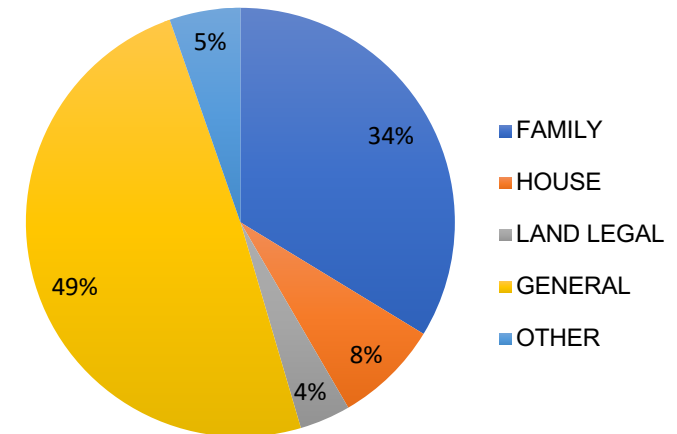
The number of page views of our website totalled 410,357 views. Our online catalogue had 286,211 views. Our resources on *Ancestry* had 707,494 views. The gaol database received 20,867 views and 18,393 via a link from Ancestry.

We added pages to our detailed information about places in Bedfordshire. These included pages for: Carlton, Chellington, properties on Bedford High Street, and as part of our Engagement Grant work, pages for Stotfold, Barton-le-Clay, Houghton Regis and Langford. We continue to welcome contributions from volunteers that use the archives as the basis for their research.

We continue to use Facebook and Instagram, but our website and email remain the best way to find out about and contact our service.



Subject of research



Outreach

- We made monthly contributions to the Leighton Buzzard Observer.
- We published newsletters in summer 2024 and spring 2025.
- We delivered nine talks to groups and organisations mostly in person, but some hybrid by Zoom or Teams.
- Seven organisations arranged bespoke group visits to the office. These included: Bedford Tour Guide trainees; Luton History Knights and the Wrest Park volunteers.
- Two schools, one from Bedford and one from Dunstable, arranged special visits to the office.



In May we had a stand at Stotfold Steam Fair, where we launched our In Step with History guided walks and celebrated the traction engines built by J Howard in Bedford and the work of traction engines and steam rollers throughout the county in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Thanks to an Engagement grant from The National Archives, archivist, Natasha Kikas, led guided walking tours in Central Bedfordshire. Called *In Step with History* the tours took place in Stotfold, Langford, Houghton Regis and Barton-le-Clay throughout the spring and summer.

The research also enabled us to complete Community History pages on our website for the four locations, which had not previously had any pages on the site. We ended in September with a display at Barton Library for Heritage Open Days



In July we provided a game for Heritage Bedford's contribution to the Bedford River Festival in July. As part of commemorating the 800th anniversary of the siege of Bedford Castle, we created a castle that participants bombarded with bean bags until they successfully landed on the three strategic targets in the outer bailey, inner bailey and the keep. The development and construction of the game was a great team effort and over the weekend over 400 people received an 'I captured the castle' sticker. The game was then used at The Higgins during the summer.

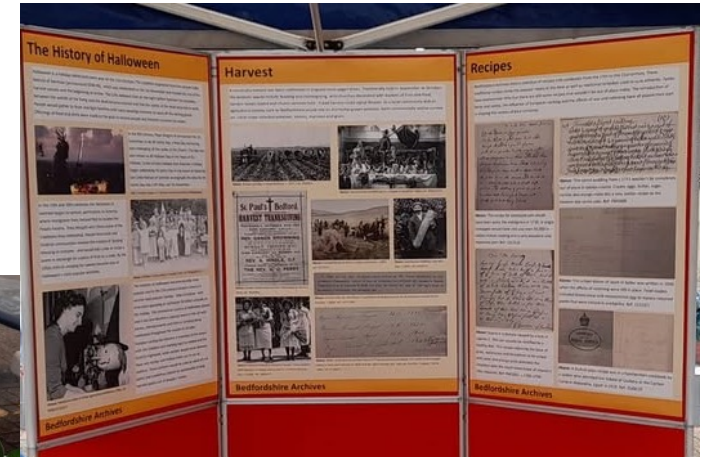


In September we had a stand at the Luton Hoo Walled Garden Heritage Open Day event, where we had an exhibition on the theme of routes and also had our castle game – which was appropriate because Luton castle was also held by Faulkes de Breute and was also demolished following the siege of Bedford castle and Faulkes' exile from England.

We had a stand at the Bedfordshire Local History Association conference at Linslade in June. Then, in October, our stand at Leighton Buzzard market family day looked at autumn traditions and the origins of Halloween as well as medicinal herbs and recipes from our collections and a chance to name the pumpkin.

Finally we met with representatives of Luton Libraries and Luton Museums to discuss outreach in Luton for 2025/26.

We thank all the organisations who have invited us to join their events and have provided us with facilities to enable us to promote our service to a wider audience.



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.

The number of boxes received totalled 433 (compared with 651 in 2023/24). These came from Bedford Borough Council: 205; Central Beds Council: 179; Luton Borough Council: 31; shared services: 15, and 6 from academies. 466 boxes were securely destroyed during year.

The number of files requested back by departments totalled 248; 133 relating to Bedford Borough Council holdings, 77 Central Beds Council, 17 Luton Borough Council, 6 Shared services, 15 Police.

The service runs a deeds registry of title deeds, agreements, leases etc. for Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. 174 items were accessioned for Bedford and 85 for Central. Approximately 660 deed packets and files were handled during the year, 535 were supplied to requesting departments and 125 files were returned by departments. While most files for Bedford Borough departments are supplied as the original physical files many files for Central Bedfordshire are more easily supplied as digital scans. This year much time was spent assisting with queries to help with the transition of Bedford Borough land charges from the council to the Land Registry.

7. For more information

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