

# *Bedfordshire Archives*



## *Annual Report 2025/26*





## *Bedfordshire Archives Annual Report, 2025/26*

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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.

2025/26 was one of business as usual. Budget challenges within local authorities once again delayed progress on a number of projects that we had been hoping to be able to pursue. We underwent the three-year review of our archive service accreditation and in November the panel confirmed our accredited status.



## 2. Staff

Our conservator, Alison Faden, retired in December. Unfortunately, due to Bedford Borough Council's recruitment freeze, we have not yet been able to replace Alison. The conservator is vital to the archive service's remit to preserve the documents we hold – not only do they repair documents they also monitor conditions and train all staff and volunteers in how to ensure the safety of the documents - so we hope that we will be able to start recruitment in 2026/27.



## Work Experience and Volunteers

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

As well as our regular volunteers we provided a term of work experience to a MENCAP supported SEND intern, and a week of conservation experience to someone intending to pursue a career in textile conservation.

We had an average of 21 volunteers at any one time. During the year five of our volunteers decided to move on to other things. However, we had a lot of interest in volunteering, and welcomed 11 new volunteers during the year. This included four new volunteers who began in January. They are listing the contents of approximately 150 boxes of project and business files created by the firm of Franklin, Deacon, Briars, architects and surveyors of Luton (FDB). By the end of March they were well over half way through and looking forward to the next phase of preparing the collection for final cataloguing.



Over the year volunteers also worked on:

- Providing content for our community archive webpages on Bedford High Street and Silver Street.
- Repackaging, cleaning and sorting various collections, including the correspondence files of Richardson & Houfe, RGH4 and RGH8.
- Cataloguing parts of: BorL, QSR, RB ratebooks, X354.
- Ongoing cataloguing of: ABP/A, ABP4, BTNeg, CA, CRT190, DCSP, RDBP, SL, X881, X928, Z41.
- The National Archives Poor Law Union Correspondence project
- Sorting Post Echo photographs.



### 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 use outstores, making more room on site for records likely to get regular use.

## 4. Collections

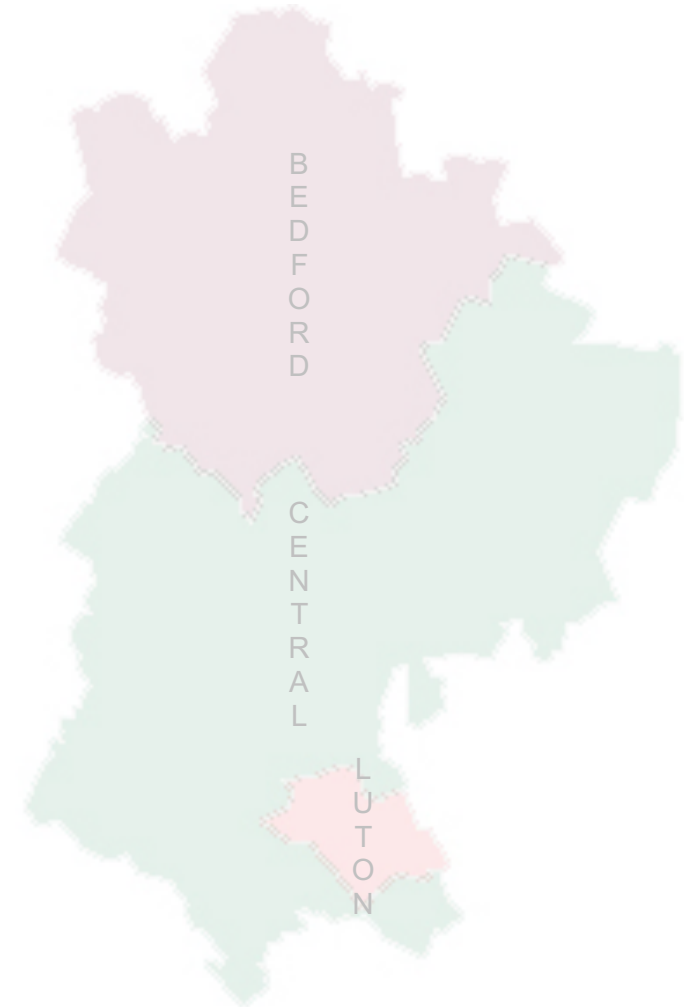
### New Accessions

69 accessions were received during the year.

Deposits included:

- The late Cllr Kay Burley, leader of Bedfordshire County Council 1995/6 (Z1888)
- North and South Bedfordshire Methodist circuits (MB)
- Bedford Borough Council minutes (UB)
- Kempston Town Council (TCKempston)
- Wootton parish council (PCWootton)
- Bedford Credit Union (X1058)
- Renhold School (SDRenhold)
- Turvey Cricket Club (Z1874)
- Amici Singers of Biggleswade (X988)
- Shillington Women's Institute (X939/71)
- Westoning church (P16)
- Stondon Parish Council (PCStondon)
- Shelton Lower School (SDShelton)
- St Peter's church, Dunstable (P72)
- Luton & Leighton Buzzard Society of Friends (FR)
- Stockwood Rugby Football Club (Z1889)
- All Saints church, Luton (P137)
- Echo & Post press photographs (Z1872)
- Davis Gas Stove Company magazines (Z1886)

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

41,377 catalogue entries were added to the online database.

Catalogue entries were added to 97 different collections. New cataloguing included: Bedfordshire County Council County Secretary's department (CS); Bedford Borough Council minutes and papers (BorB), Bedford Borough estate deeds (DCNBE), and various smaller collections.

In July the archivists spent an intense week improving the catalogue of a large solicitor's collection, Benning and Hoare, that came into the office in 1969, but that was little used due to the poor quality of the original 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 on revising and streamlining the subject index for our online catalogue.

## Conservation

353 items passed through the conservation studio, which included: 39 volumes, 101 plans, 70 documents, 13 illustrations, 115 bespoke enclosures. Our conservator retired at the end of December and has yet to be replaced.

In May we hosted a meeting of the Midland Conservators' Group, where our conservator explained the new methods she had devised for stabilising broken glass plate negatives. This was also written up and published via a conservators' peer reviewed website.

Volunteers continued the repackaging of RGH4 and RGH8, started packaging of UDLLP and DCSP, and carried out the cleaning of various dirty documents to prevent dirt transferring to other documents.



## Projects

In January four new volunteers started work on a project to make a list of the contents of the boxes of business papers and project files of Franklin, Deacon, Briars, architects of Luton (FDB). By the end of the year 90 of the approximately 150 boxes had been listed onto a spreadsheet. This will enable us to understand the collection and prepare a scheme for the final cataloguing. The volunteers have made some interesting and unexpected discoveries including: files on the selling off of army surplus from Biscot camp and a camp in Devon, when the camps closed at the end of World War One; some samples of bleached of straw plait, and 1930s brochures on the use of concrete and asbestos as building materials.

## 5. Public Access

The number of visits to the office was 552. 18% of visitors identified themselves as researching for work e.g. land use surveys, and 16% for academic study e.g. PhD thesis; the rest were for personal interest.

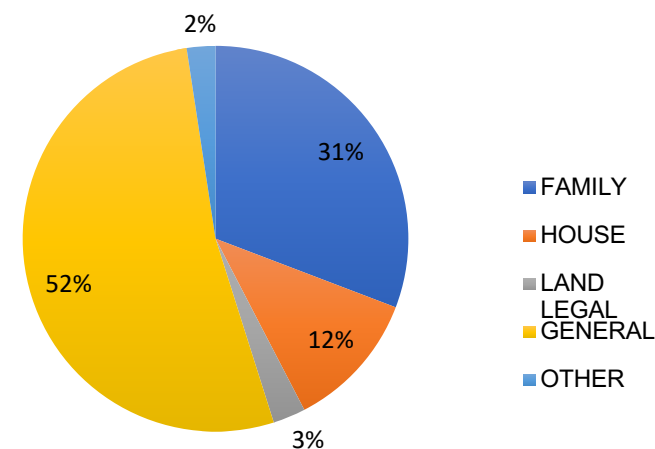
The number of documents retrieved from the stacks for visitors and enquiries was 8,544.

Staff answered 656 enquiries that required detailed advice or research. We continue to encourage people to use our website and search our catalogue before contacting us. In spite of having a system that enables customers to submit their enquiry by form we still receive about 50% of our enquiries by email, which then have to be manually logged onto the system by staff. We have seen an increase in enquiries based on inaccurate results produced by Artificial Intelligence, which can cause considerable confusion.

We seek people's views and monitor and respond to feedback. Comments included:

- 'Thank you very much for your in depth report I'm really grateful for the professional expertise you have brought to the matter I can't thank you enough.'
- 'Thank you so much for your extremely prompt and detailed response. I really appreciate the time you took to cross-check the index and provide such a clear explanation. Your reply has genuinely helped clear the way to a better understanding of my family tree. Unfortunately, platforms like [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) are becoming increasingly cluttered with inaccuracies, assumptions, and guesswork. Without knowledgeable archivists like yourself to help verify these records, it's all too easy to follow the wrong thread and end up lost in fiction. Thanks again for your clarity and support, your work makes a real difference to people trying to preserve their family history properly.'
- 'Best archive visited – nothing was too much trouble.'
- 'Just wanted to say thank you, I've found out some information about my family history that I never would have known without this archive'
- 'It was very interesting to learn more about the documents you hold, how we can access them and make use of them in our research. We found your explanations of document legal status and copyright particularly helpful.'
- 'I'd like to say a very big emotional thank you to the lovely lady who made some suggestions yesterday one of which gave me answers to questions the family have had for years. I've also followed up on some very useful tips, not sure yet if they provide any further information but nice to be guided in other directions. So thank you, a great credit to the team at Bedford'
- 'I just wanted to write and thank you — and the whole team — for a wonderful visit on Monday. I have had the pleasure of visiting many archives, but I have never before experienced such a high level of service, helpfulness, and friendliness.'
- We also received feedback relating to our fees for reproduction. Our policy is to require worldwide rights all media fees for any use of images of our collections on websites as once something is on the internet we have lost all control regardless of the intention or intended audience of the website owner. The feedback we received did not agree with our policy saying 'Could you please pass on my disappointment in Bedfordshire Archives requiring such a fee for a local heritage website. If commercial use was being made of an object, I would, of course, expect you to require a payment, but to require such a fee for a history-based free-to-air community website to use as an illustration on one page makes it completely unaffordable.'

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
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### 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 c een registers but each entry gives some of the following details of the criminal: name, age, hair colour, height, crime, dates of co nce and means of disposal e.g. release, death, transportation etc. The database presently covers the period between 1801 and s updated on a weekly basis. Our aim is to add the details from all the surviving County Gaol and House of Correction registers i eriod 1801 - 1901, an approximate total of 35,000+ entries.

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

Year From:  Year To:   
 First Name:  Last Name:

## Online presence

The approximate number of page views of: our website 328,909; our online catalogue 309,657; our resources on *Ancestry* had 1,175,777.

The gaol database received approximately 116,464 views and 20,297 via a link from Ancestry. We have no explanation for the very large increase in views of the gaol database in the last two quarters of the year, however we did also provide the data to a university research project.

We added pages to our detailed information about places in Bedfordshire. These included pages for properties on High Street and Silver Street, Bedford, thanks to one of our volunteers.

We reinvigorated our use of Facebook and Instagram. By the end of the year we had 1417 followers on Facebook (a 45% increase on the previous year) and 862 followers on Instagram. Our website and email remain the best way to find out about and contact our service.

## Outreach

We delivered nineteen talks to groups and organisations across the county, some hybrid by Zoom. One of our archivists also contributed to an online training event run by the Society of Genealogists

Five organisations arranged bespoke group visits to the office. These included: groups from Flitwick: A Living History; Made in Luton: Vauxhall, and the W H Allen Association. Feedback included: 'It was very informative on how the Archives are kept safely and made available to the public and ensures these valuable assets are kept for future research. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the visit, it was well worth it.'



In April we had a stand at Leighton Buzzard Family Market.

Throughout May we had an exhibition called *Stories from the Stacks* at Luton Central Library and gave a talk at the library around the themes of: work, health, home, transport and leisure.



We provided exhibition panels to the Flitwick: A Living History project and supported their events at Flitwick Library. It was lovely to see parents discussing the panels with their children at the launch event for the Kingsbrook School map later in the year.



We were delighted that one of our documents (reference ABC20) was featured in the second series of the Radio 3 programme *The Song Detectorists*. This series focuses on music and songs to be found in County Record Offices. Producer Natalie Steed, Professor Stephen Rose from Royal Holloway College, and presenter Matthew Bannister visited the office in September to record the programme, which takes a fascinating look at a mid-17<sup>th</sup> century political protest song, the sentiments of which still resonant today, unexpectedly written within a book of church legal documents.

We attended the Bedfordshire Local History Association's annual conference at Colmworth in June and their joint conference with the Hertfordshire Local History Association at Barton-le-Clay in November.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> September we joined Luton Hoo Walled Garden for their Heritage Open Day. Our display, reusing one originally created for Luton Central Library, raised lots of questions amongst the visitors and our input was greatly appreciated by the organisers.

For the three days of the Bedfordshire Steam & Country Fayre at Old Warden Park we enticed over 400 people young and old to: engage with our display, chat with us about what Bedfordshire Archives have to offer and rise to the challenge of our traction engine themed game. The targets for the bean bags were on a representation of 'Dorothy' a Clayton & Shuttleworth traction engine owned by the Shuttleworth Collection. Thanks to the Bedfordshire Steam Preservation Trust we were really well placed and our archivists had a lovely time – and a very good workout retrieving all the bean bags that were thrown. As well as introducing lots of people to Bedfordshire Archives the event resulted in: two new volunteers, three bookings for talks, searchroom bookings, and helped us to network with people from the Shuttleworth Collection for whom we hold a significant collection of records.



We began a series of talks to the Elstow Manor Care Home. The residents picked topics that they wanted to hear about and we provided talks and items for discussion.

We provided a training event for The Gardens Trust Green Futures project for which we received the feedback 'Many thanks indeed for your tour, demonstrations, and advice to the group last Thursday. I know that they all found it very helpful even some of the more experienced volunteers – one told me she hadn't felt able to use the 'expert' search button [on the catalogue] before and now felt confident she could.'

In October we ran tours of Records Management and Archives for internal council staff in the hope of a better understanding of the service and what it does for departments. We also contributed news articles to the Bedford Borough Council Environment department's internal newsletter.

In the autumn half term we attended another of the Leighton Buzzard family markets.

Towards the end of the year we had another exhibition at Luton Central Library and gave another talk at the library, this time about the history and identification of photographs.

On the 31st March we again attended the Leighton Buzzard Family Market, which was another big success. Dorothy had another outing and was bombarded with bean bags (and quite a lot of small feet) by 144 children in less than 3 hours! Fortunately, she is washable!



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 511 (compared with 433 in 2024/25). These came from Bedford Borough Council: 242; Central Beds Council: 144; Luton Borough Council: 40; shared services: 76, and 9 from academies. 446 boxes were securely destroyed during year.

The number of files requested back by departments totalled 144; 84 relating to Bedford Borough Council holdings, 45 Central Beds Council, 11 Luton Borough Council, 4 Shared services.

The service runs a deeds registry of title deeds, agreements, leases etc. for Bedford Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council. 172 items were accessioned for Bedford and 81 for Central. Approximately 1,847 deed packets and files were dealt with during the year, 215 were supplied to requesting departments and 124 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 hence, 10 scans were supplied to Bedford Borough and 234 to Central Bedfordshire. 69 external enquiries were answered relating to highways agreements in Bedford Borough.

## 7. For more information

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