

ARCHIVES UPDATE:

The Archives Service is re-opening for searchroom visits by the public in September however, it is not 'business as usual' and won't be for some time. Below County Archivist, Pamela Birch, explains some of the challenges we've faced and how the service will operate for the time being.

As the Government announced the start of the easing of lockdown and the re-opening of various business premises we of course started to consider when we might be able to reopen and what form that might take. First you have to take into account the latest government rules and the advice of Public Health England and the WHO. Guidance for archives services in England has been collated and updated by The National Archives and individual county record offices have been sharing their thoughts through their own network. Then there were the local circumstances to take into consideration.



With staff not having had access to the building since the end of March and with some still redeployed to other council services it was clear that any reopening would have to be done in phases. The first step was to carry out a risk assessment to establish whether it was possible to allow staff back into our building safely. Our building is shared with other services and so it was not just our staff that had to be considered.

Risk assessment done, circulated and approved, by mid-July we were allowed a member of staff into the office two days a week

to work on remote enquiries and copying orders. From this date we started to clear some of the many requests that had built up but as soon as one request was cleared another came in and two complicated legal enquiries were taking a lot of the available time.

Building on the risk assessment and with the experience gained by the two staff who had been allowed in I started to formulate a recovery plan. In order to be able to maintain social distancing it would only be possible to have small numbers in at any one time and contact between different people needed to be kept to a minimum. The solution was to split the staff into two teams alternating a week in the office with a week at home. With staff taking well earned leave in August the number of staff on site at any one time was further reduced but at last significant progress on the enquiry backlog was possible.

Next came the challenge of how we could open for public visits. With a very reduced staff



on site and the need for social distancing, enhanced cleaning and quarantining of material that cannot be cleaned, restrictions were inevitable. We watched with interest as The National Archives and county record offices around the country started to open to visitors to see what restrictions they were using.

For us some things won't change—pre-booked visits only is something we have done for several years, you should always wash your hands before and after handling documents.

But now we will have to know every item from the stacks or the searchroom shelves that you need well in advance so that it can be retrieved and quarantined. Full details will be published on our website. Everyone will be aware that the situation is constantly changing. We will keep our procedures under review and update them as necessary. Our aim is to enable access to the documents we hold in a way that is as open as possible, maintains the safety of the staff, the users and of course the documents.

THANK YOU—FOR KEEPING THINGS GOING

Although the service has been closed since March that doesn't mean we haven't been working. I would like to say thank you to all the archives and records service staff who have coped admirably with working under strange and difficult circumstances.

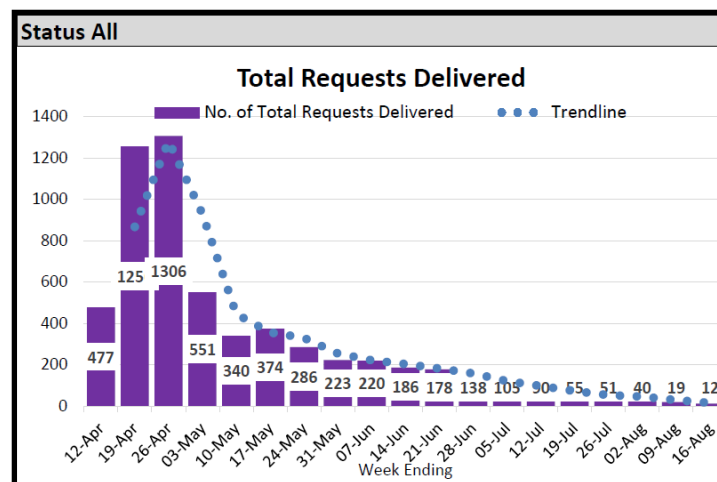
The Records part of the Archives & Records Service rarely features in the pages of our newsletter but this small team has continued its work almost as business as usual. In spite of restricted access to Borough Hall they have done their best to ensure that the departmental records that we store for Bedford, Central and Luton unitary authorities were available to those departments when they were required. They have also responded to the enquiries of solicitors needing access and copies of legal agreements to enable some house sales to go through. Finally the team is responsible for the central administration of Freedom of Information, Environment Information and Subject Access requests made to Bedford Borough Council. Trying to make sure these requests are answered within the statutory time limits when everyone is suddenly working in a different way, in different locations and sometime in completely different departments has been no easy task.

On the archives side of things mention must be made of two of our archivists who kept the archive flag flying. Carol took on the responsibility for answering the remote enquiries as they came in, keeping enquirers informed and answering questions as fully as possible without access to the building or the resources that would normally be to hand. Then as soon as she could access the building revisiting the enquiries and sending updates as quickly as possible. Our digital technician, Kirsty, played her part in this too. Meanwhile our part-time archivist Kathryn concentrated on website updates and on creating online content to commemorate the 75th anniversary of VJ day and our contribution to this year's Heritage Open Days (see back page for details) again without access to our normal range of material.

Also soldiering on were our cataloguing assistants adding to our online catalogues, and indexing material for publication on Ancestry. A huge thank you to you all.

Those staff who have been redeployed to the Bedford Borough Community Hub have also been working hard. The Hub has evolved and developed. At the beginning of April demand for help was very high and a number of different teams were put in place to deal with the different requirements of residents. As supermarkets and pharmacies got to grips with customer needs, lockdown eased and shielding came to an end, demand for the council's offer reduced and the different teams were brought together and reformatted several times. Archives staff who had at first helped with organising volunteers and prescription collection now found themselves organising shopping lists and befriending too. We didn't work alone of course but with people from other council departments and people from

outside the council. When asked what was the best thing about working on the hub Kay, who is usually one of our cataloguing assistants, said 'working with so many other people who all wanted to do their bit and help out' she also commented on how good it had been to work with people from a younger generation!



LAND AHOY!

Archives can be important for all sorts of research but a recent piece of work for Bedford Borough Council's legal team helped establish title to a piece of land it wanted to register.

In this particular case we had evidence that the Borough Council and Bedfordshire County Council before it had administered the piece of land as we had letting agreements for it, what we didn't have was any obvious answer to how we had got the land in the first place. This indicated that we had owned it for a long time and had probably received it as a transfer from a previous body when that body ceased to exist.

With a bit of detective work we found that in the first decade of the 19th century the land had been awarded during enclosure to the parish to provide gravel for highway repairs. In 1894 this responsibility for highways and also the land transferred to the rural district council. In 1929 this responsibility transferred again to the County Council and then in 2009

to the Borough. Having worked out the 200 year history of the piece of land the next thing was for the County Archivist to make a statutory declaration to present to land registry.

It is not the first time that the archives we hold and our understanding of and the history of local government has helped the present unitary authorities of Bedfordshire answer enquiries about the land they now own.



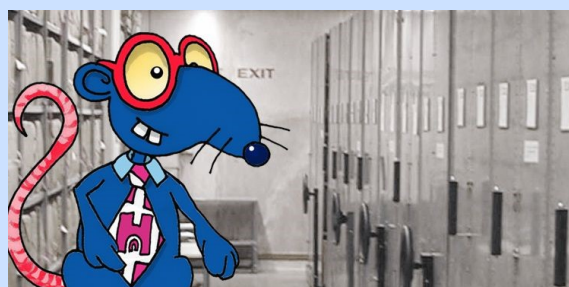
HERITAGE OPEN DAYS 2020

Unfortunately we cannot invite you to any physical events this year but we will be launching two online activities on 11th September to open up the archives whatever the weather. The theme of this years HOD is Hidden Nature so our two activities reflect this.



Our online treasure trail takes you on a virtual tour of Bedfordshire via a series of clues linked to fauna and flora in the archives but if you prefer not to follow the trail and solve the clues, the map can be explored on its own.

Our other challenge is designed to be a fun way to explore our online catalogue. By finding the references to certain documents you can enlist the help of animals hidden in the archives to drive Desmond the rat out of the stacks before he has time to nibble anything. We hope that by building your confidence in using expert search to find something you know is on the catalogue you will be inspired to continue searching to see what else is available.



The link will go live on 11th September. Enjoy!

<https://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/ExploreYourArchive/Hidden-Nature/Hidden-Nature-in-Bedfordshire-Archives.aspx>

COMING SOON

With some new technology at our fingertips and a new insight into what it is like to be working remotely from the documents we love, this autumn we invite you to join us in our:

- relaunch of our Community Archives webpages.
- Webinars on how to use our online catalogue

Whether you want to find out what we have, learn about a local community or help us to publish more information about the communities of Bedfordshire we hope you will find something to interest you. Look out for details on our website and social media in the next few weeks or contact us for more information.

We welcome ideas and material for future issues. Published by Bedfordshire Archives Service, Riverside Building, Borough Hall, Bedford MK42 9AP. Tel: (01234) 228833 E-mail: archive@bedford.gov.uk Online at: www.bedford.gov.uk/archive

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