

## **Specific Recommendations from the Volunteer Town Archivists to the Much Wenlock Town Council, November 2015.**

### **Background:**

Over a number of years the Town Council has taken steps to aid in conserving material in the Much Wenlock Archives. While retaining ownership the Council has also approved the move of many of the most historically important documents into the Shropshire Archives in Shrewsbury for safekeeping. There the professional archivists and conservator, aided by a large team of county wide trained volunteers, have helped to clean, catalogue, conserve and restore these records. There are, however, some very old documents which await funds for specialist conservation. Meanwhile some important collections which remain in Much Wenlock have deteriorated through a lack of suitable levels of environmental control. Funds are now required to address these priorities both locally and in Shropshire Archives.

### **Recommendations:**

1. That the Council should approve a budget for 2016-17 including an appropriate sum for archival conservation. The following are the priority recommended expenditures. Some funds might be allocated immediately, others in the new financial year. -
  - £300** To fund immediate day to day conservation activities in the archives room in the Corn Exchange. This will permit purchase of a thermo-hygrometer to monitor the environment and, if necessary, essential environmental control equipment.
  - £2500** As a 50% contribution to the cost of conservation of the first Minute Book of the Borough of Wenlock. This is now over 500 years old. It is lodged with the Shropshire Archives but owned by MWTC. The total cost of conservation, to be managed through the Shropshire Archives, is estimated at over £5,000.
2. That the Council should support an appeal to the public and to neighbouring Parish Councils to contribute to funding the remaining cost of conservation of the first Borough Minute Book, from 1495 to 1658, which requires individual conservation page by page as well as rebinding.
3. That the Council should consider whether to celebrate, in 2018, the 550th Anniversary of the granting of a Charter to the Borough of Wenlock.
4. That the Council should consider whether to invite the Volunteer Town Archivists, and/or the Shropshire Archivist, to give them an illustrated briefing on the nature and importance of the town archives.

(The Annual Report on work within the Much Wenlock Archives is attached overleaf.)

## **Annual Report from the Volunteer Town Archivists to the Much Wenlock Town Council, November 2015.**

It is now over a year since the Town Archivists last reported in full to the Town Council. An exhibition was held in the Guildhall in October 2014 following a talk given to detail the work undertaken by the volunteers of Shropshire Archives. This detailed steps taken to conserve records from Much Wenlock held in Shrewsbury for safekeeping. It also detailed the outcome of historical research on aspects of these records. Subsequently, records held in Shrewsbury, as well as records still held in the archive room in Much Wenlock, have been used to illustrate the impact of WWI on the town and townspeople 100 years ago. The research of the town archivists informed the August 2015 exhibition in the Guildhall.

A major concern over the past year has been the spread of damp in the archive room. Delay in dealing with the damp resulted in mould forming on leather bound books in the display cabinets. After taking advice from the Head Conservator at Shropshire Archives the worst affected books have been cleaned and seem to have suffered no permanent damage. In the long term there is a need to have a controlled archives environment. As an interim solution a digital hygrometer need to be purchased to monitor the damp. Meanwhile the glass fronts of the bookcase against the outside wall need to be kept open to avoid condensation.

At the time of the last report to the council the archivists were completing the conservation and indexing of recently donated scrapbooks. These covered events in Much Wenlock in the decades from the 1950s to the last decade of the century. They had been collated by the late William Grainger and donated by his daughter. In the current year we have been grateful for a further donation of a large scrapbook and associated documents. These date from the 19th Century and were donated by Mike Hall a descendant of Cllr Thursfield, a former Mayor. During his time as Mayor of the Borough of Wenlock Cllr Thursfield kept a scrap book on the celebrations for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1887.

The scrapbook records events held in Much Wenlock including the Jubilee Sports. The competitors were invited to take place in such sporting activities as climbing a greasy pole for a leg of lamb or taking part in the 100 yards flat race for women over 60 years of age ! In Broseley, then part of the Borough of Wenlock, the celebrations concentrated on raising funds to erect the Victoria Hall. Much of the scrapbook is devoted to Cllr Thursfield's participation as Mayor in national celebrations, such as his invitation from the Prince of Wales to attend a banquet in celebration at the Mansion House in London.

Research has continued alongside conservation, indexing and organisation. During the year a paper has been completed exploring the personalities and background of some of the patrons of the Much Wenlock Agricultural Reading Society (WARS). These individuals had their names carved into particular shelves. Several, such as the Duke of Wellington, seem never to have visited or to have had any real link with Much Wenlock. However, others, who took a close interest and had local links, were of national or international significance. Any council member wishing to read this paper can be emailed a copy.

Alongside research, there has been an attempt to sift, and where appropriate discard, duplicate records held in the archives. This has been beneficial in making it easier to find records and in providing more room to store records systematically. This work has been shared by the Volunteer Town Archivists and by the Volunteer Wenlock Olympians Archivist, since both bodies share the same storage space. As a result space has been found

to file materials safely in the filing cabinet that had previously been inaccessible. Some of it had simply been lying within boxes in overcrowded cupboards for decades.

Gaining access to some of this material has been a revelation. In particular, it has been very interesting and humbling to discover evidence of the immense contribution of one of the earlier town archivists, Mr Lloyd. From 1957 through to the late 1960s Mr L. C. Lloyd was employed by the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of Birmingham to run courses in Much Wenlock. However, these were not purely instructional courses but focused on research in local history and encouraged participants to pursue individual research. The programme concentrated on studying and understanding the significance of historical documents and other material held in the Wenlock Borough Archives.

Access to the Borough Archives was granted by the Town Clerk and in later years the Vicar granted access to the Much Wenlock Parish Registers. Course members were also directed to the excellent resources then in the library in the Coalbrookdale Institute, since converted into a Youth Hostel. The course was a community activity and participants were local. Mr Lloyd himself did not actually live in Much Wenlock but on the Wenlock Road in Shrewsbury. Despite this, it is clear that he was formally recognised as the town archivist. Moreover, he was also instrumental in creating the first Much Wenlock Museum which was opened in the Corn Exchange in 1968. He was also largely responsible for the celebrations marking the 500th Anniversary of the first Charter granted to Much Wenlock by King Edward IV in 1468. The council may now consider marking the 550th anniversary in 2018.

The courses, which were part of the Adult Education programme, were run each year on Tuesday evenings from 7.30 to 9.30 pm throughout the Autumn, Winter and early Spring. Initially, they were held in the Guildhall, later they moved to the Corn Exchange and by 1965 some classes were also being held at the council offices in Ironbridge. There were opportunities for course members to join related vacation and weekend courses. The enthusiasm of participants, several of them teachers, may be judged by amusing correspondence complaining about them hanging around talking after classes were finished. This was preventing the hard working Guildhall caretaker from getting to bed early!

Participants in the course lived locally and helped in the research necessary to develop the museum. They also contributed to several academic papers but the impact on them was, in some cases, wider. Among the group was William Mumford who went on to write a book entitled 'Wenlock in the Middle Ages'. Several others were teachers, including Mrs Joyce Beard of Sheinton Street, who was Headmistress at Church Preen. Her interest in history seems to have been passed on to her daughter, Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at Cambridge University, who is now celebrated for her TV programmes on the Roman world.

The archivists have responded to a number of enquiries about local history from members of the public and at times on behalf of the Town Clerk. Valuable support from Shropshire Archives has continued and their staff have, in particular, advised us on conservation matters. They also submitted a bid for funds from the National Manuscript Conservation Trust to conserve the earliest minute books from the Much Wenlock Borough, currently lodged within the Shropshire Archives but owned by the Town Council. The earliest of these dates from before 1500 and its survival for over 500 years is little short of miraculous. It is among the earliest surviving minute books of any Borough in England but this bid was not successful. The Shropshire Archivist is now seeking local funding. Significant financial support from the Town Council would assist in any wider public appeal for funds.