

VCH Shropshire

Annual report for the year ending 31 August 2017

The VCH county committee has pleasure in presenting its report for the year.

The year has seen steady progress being made on a number of fronts, and if some of the ambitions expressed in our first annual report have not been entirely met in the present year, we have important developments to report.

Perhaps the key achievement for the future was that our registration as a charity was finally achieved in April. This allows us access to funding previously denied to us, and we shall be taking advantage of this in the next year. We are most grateful to Nigel Hinton and David Saunders for their work in achieving this.

A second development is that we launched our website about Easter and in a further stage moved our email list to Mailchimp. (This allows our supporters to add their name to the mailing list, or remove it, without any intervention on our part.) We owe both developments to Catherine Glover. Two newsletters were issued during the year.

The county committee met on 7 occasions during the year. Its officers and members remain the same except in one respect: we invited Mrs Linda Fletcher to join the committee as a representative of the Newport History Society, and she acts as the liaison between the two societies.

Funding

As in previous years we are grateful to the Jean Jackson Trust and the Walker Trust for their support. A number of small grants have been received, including one from the Victoria County History Trust towards the cost of illustrations for the Wem 'short'. As in previous years we acknowledge the continued support of the Shropshire History and Archaeological Society. The county committee recognises the need to bring in funding from other sources: at the moment the speed at which VCH can proceed in the county is limited by the funding available to it. We recognise the trap that we work too slowly and publish too infrequently to be thought worthy of funding whilst the speed at which we work is the outcome of our funding.

Wem (urban)

Our major effort over the past year has been devoted to the history of Wem (town), or Wem Urban. The text of the Wem 'short' was submitted to Central Office on 12 July. Central Office subsequently asked for some revisions to be made. The opportunity was also taken during the summer of 2017 to incorporate some additional material (for which see below). At the time of writing we are close to sending the revised text back to Central Office. We hope that we will then have a speedy and uncomplicated passage through any further refereeing process and achieve expeditious publication, but we are now looking to the New Year for the appearance of the 'short'.

Wem has, in some respects, thrown up more materials than we could use on this occasion. Richard Hoyle discovered a large estate archive in the National Archives for the period in which the estates of the fourth earl of Bradford were under the control of Chancery during the lifetime John Smith or Newport, his illegitimate son, who was declared a lunatic after he tried to travel to France to join the young pretender. As Smith was held to be incapable of managing his affairs, all expenditure on them was subject to the approval of a Master in Chancery and the archive includes both petitions to undertake expenditure

(including a subscription to the Wem fire engine!) and accounts. At a very late stage of our work on Wem, Judith Everard and Richard Hoyle travelled to Raby Castle in county Durham where, through the kindness of Lord Barnard we were able to see some of the substantial accumulation of Shropshire material there. These include the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century title deeds to the manor of Wem. They contained no great surprises but allow us to bring precision to our account.

After the first version of the short had been submitted, the preparation of a catalogue of the Dicken of Loppington papers (see below) produced some choice references and gave us a precise date for the building of Wem Hall (the modern Park House).

A large number of friends and supporters have contributed to the Wem short. Wendy Horton took charge of the buildings and built fabric, but the work of moulding the work of many hands into a single entity has largely fallen on Judith Everard who has also written substantial sections. VCH Shropshire is grateful to them all and hope that they will see the fruits of their labour before too long.

Wem (rural)

As a by-product of our work on Wem urban, Dr Everard has acquired a great deal of knowledge of the townships of Wem rural parish. The committee thought it best if she were to proceed directly from Wem urban to draft the VCH account of these townships. This will be her priority after the Wem short is finally put to bed. We envisage that her histories will be published in the first instance on our website as a public resource.

As a first step towards this aim, Dr Everard was commissioned to prepare a list of the Dicken of Loppington archive in the Shropshire Archives. The Dickens were one of the few gentry landowners in the manor of Wem and the lack of any catalogue to their archive was an obvious impediment to writing on Wem rural. As it happened, the cataloguing threw up some additional materials that we were delighted to be able to incorporate into the Wem short. The costs of the cataloguing was shared with the Friends of the Shropshire Archives with whom we were delighted to cooperate on this occasion.

VCH Shrewsbury part two.

We mentioned in our last report that the arrangements for the management and publication of this volume rested with VCH Central Office at the Institute of Historical Research and that as presently constituted they could not advance the volume. Responsibility for its completion has therefore been transferred to the county committee.

The volume has, however, suffered a reverse with the sadly premature death of W. A. (Bill) Champion on 25 June. Bill's knowledge of the history of Shrewsbury, especially early modern Shrewsbury, was comprehensive. He was a lead contributor (and was named as joint editor) of the first (narrative) volume of VCH's Shrewsbury history. He had drafted extensive sections of the second volume and intended to do more, but illness before the diagnosis of the condition which brought about his premature death prevented him from doing so. The responsibility of bringing this volume to fruition is all the greater given that we do no longer have Bill on the team. VCH Shropshire offers its sincere condolences to Bill's widow and family.

We have set up a small group working on preparing an enhanced gazetteer of nonconformist congregations in Shrewsbury. This will fatten out the gazetteer prepared some years ago by Mrs Janice Cox by incorporating materials drawn from on line newspapers and documents received more recently by Shropshire Archives.

We have also begun the work of adding the text already prepared for the volume to the website where it may be consulted by readers. Two recently written sections (on burial

grounds and education) have been posted so far and others, including some of Bill Champion's drafts, will follow over the next few months.

Overall though, the volume needs two of three years of research time to bring it to completion.

Newport and the Weald Moors

At the time that Dr David Cox retired in 2002 (and VCH activity in the county went into abeyance), a further VCH volume on Newport and the Weald Moors was partly researched and some sections of it had been written. It has always been our intention to complete this volume after Wem. Newport though is a much larger (and better documented) town than Wem, and with the five Weald Moor parishes, this is a much larger project than Wem. We will be heavily reliant here on volunteers and we envisage that at least a part of the costs of managing them, researching the project and developing a public programme will be the subject of an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund in late 2017 or 2018.

In the past year we have undertaken a number of steps towards fulfilling this ambition.

- We have made contact with the Newport History Society who will be our partners in the project at least so far as it relates to Newport. As we noted before, Linda Fletcher has joined the VCH Committee. A delegation from the Newport History Society and VCH met with the clerk to Newport Town Council on 25 July to discuss the possibility of the council offering us some funding towards a scoping study on Newport, which would in time underpin an application to the HLF for a volunteer-driven programme of research. An application was made to the council. At the time of writing, we have not heard the outcome although we understand that they support the project 'in principle'.
- Contact has also been established with Telford and Wrekin Council.
- The text prepared by Dr and Mrs Cox before his retirement has been added to the VCH website where it may be consulted.

We would be interested in hearing from local historians interested in contributing to the Newport project, or to the history of the Weald Moor parishes

Public activities

VCH Shropshire is committed to finding the widest audience for its work. Our first annual lecture on 29 October 2016 was a considerable success with over 100 coming to hear Gareth Williams talk about Capability Brown's work in Shropshire. This was a splendid occasion and we are most grateful to Gareth for getting the annual lecture off to a flying start. We fulfilled our promise to return to Wem and talk about Wem history. A good crowd of nearly 100 turned out on a Sunday morning in June to hear Judith Everard, James Bowen, Wendy Horton and Richard Hoyle discuss the research that will appear in the Wem short. We were handsomely rewarded with a full page report in the *Whitchurch Herald* on 28 June.

Judith Everard with the support of James Bowen spoke to the Newport History Society in May on VCH and its ambitions to complete the Newport and Weald Moors volume. After the year end she also attended the Newport History Day on 9 September. Richard Hoyle in his capacity as chairman gave the annual Ritherdon lecture of the South-West Shropshire Historical and Archaeological Society on 11 April.

Richard Hoyle
28 October 2017