

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Annual Report for the year ending 31 August 2020

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

This, for reasons we all know, has been an exceptional and unprecedented year. Historical research has been a minor casualty of Lockdown and whilst it would not be true to say that VCH Shropshire has hibernated, the second half of this reporting year has been one of marking time. This is especially unfortunate given that so many things were coming together in the latter part of 2019. In particular we published our history of Wem in November and held a successful launch in Wem Town Hall on 30 November. (In fact the first printing of the Wem history had largely sold out by the end of the year and a reprint was being contemplated.) At the beginning of 2020 we anticipated that this would be a bumper report detailing achievements on several fronts.

It is undeniable that since the imposition of Lockdown in March, much momentum has been lost. Whilst we have a great deal of text drafted, our inability to access libraries and archives (a situation which had only begun to lift at the end of the year) meant that text which was mostly prepared could not be finalised for publication. New initiatives could not be started. We have carried on with the transcription of documents of which we had photographs, but again the months of Lockdown could have been used more profitably if we had anticipated the situation and photographed more before the closure of archives. This then is a report of activity in the first half of the year and great frustration in the second. At the year end it was still not clear when a degree of normality would be restored, and so the VCH Committee took the decision to cancel the annual meeting, in part because it recognised that even if permitted by the government's emergency legislation, many people would not wish to come together in an enclosed public space to hear the annual report and lecture. Dr Della Hooke, who was to have been our speaker, was happy to accept our decision and we have extended an invitation to her to be our speaker in 2021.

The chair was grateful to have the opportunity to meet with the trustees of the Walker Trust on 27 January to outline VCH's ambitions and future plans although, as will be appreciated, within a few weeks much of what was outlined then had had to be put on hold. We appreciated the confidence they displayed in us when making a subsequent award.

In terms of personnel, Sarah Lane stood down as secretary because of ill-health. We wish to record our thanks to her for her valuable contribution to VCH Shropshire at a formative moment, and we wish her a full recovery. Dr Elizabeth New of Aberystwyth University, and a resident of Shrewsbury, joined the committee towards the end of the year. The committee remained eager to reinforce its numbers with new, committed members, particularly ones who would share some of the workload.

Shrewsbury Part two

At the time that Lockdown was imposed, we were ready to start work on the account of the parish churches of the town. Here we have an incomplete typescript made over the years with contributions by divers hands: it needs editing, extending, updating, gaps filling and the architectural accounts of the churches adding in. It was not possible to make any progress on

this during Lockdown when there was neither access to the archives or the churches themselves.

On a happier note, the 'Nonconformist Group' of Dr Rosemary Thornes, Lyn Leach and Jonathan Davies delivered the text of the revised Red Book section on Protestant Nonconformity and the draft *Gazetteer of Nonconformist Places of Worship* in November 2019. These texts were copy edited during Lockdown but could not be brought to a final conclusion until access could once again be gained to the resources of Shropshire Archives. The help of Mrs Janice Cox in polishing this text during Lockdown is gratefully acknowledged. It is intended that the Red Book text on Protestant Nonconformity will be published on the VCH Shropshire website in the last months of 2020, and the Gazetteer in 2021. Other text for Shrewsbury Part Two was revised during Lockdown and will also be posted on the website towards the end of the calendar year (continued access to libraries and archives permitting).

Wem

The Wem short was launched in Wem Town Hall on Saturday 30 November before a sizeable audience. Coffee and cake was served: speeches were made. Most of a hundred copies of the book were sold. The three authors were interviewed on BBC Radio Shropshire and a report about the book appeared in the *Whitchurch Herald* shortly before Christmas. The 'short' was warmly welcomed and the few reviews that we have seen so far have been laudatory.

Two subsidiary articles were prepared which will appear in the *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and History Society* later in 2020, the first on the Wem historian Samuel Garbett by Drs Bowen and Everard and the second, by Dr Everard alone, on the Wem market charter, explaining why there never was one. The paper shows that the belief that there was arises out of an eighteenth-century misreading of a source in the National Archives.

Wem Rural

By the end of 2019 Dr Judith Everard had prepared full drafts of eight of the Wem Rural townships (Aston, Horton, Lowe and Ditches, Newtown, Northwood, Sleaf, Tilley and Wolverley). Two remained outstanding (Edstaston and Cotton). It was decided that work on the last two townships should be deferred and a new contract issued for their completion. At the time Lockdown began, we were looking for funding to enable us to do that.

Wendy Horton was commissioned to undertake a building survey and produce accounts of the buildings and built environment to be inserted into Dr Everard's texts and this was done during the Winter of 2019-20.

Additional material was transcribed during Lockdown. It is hoped that the first of the texts will be published on the website in the last quarter of 2020.

Newport

A group convened by Linda Fletcher transcribed the (Lloyd George) Valuation Office survey (National Archives, IR 58) for Newport and some of the adjacent parishes during the last half of 2019. This was revised during Lockdown but could not be brought to a final conclusion until the National Archives reopened because of a handful of missing or illegible pages. We are grateful to all the transcribers for their work. This will form the basis of a discussion of housing and property ownership in Newport at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Contact was made with the long-established Newport estate agents White Perry and Davies about examining the archive remaining at their offices (much of it already having been disposed of). Linda Fletcher and Richard Hoyle met with Caroline Davies of the firm, and in February he and Mary MacKenzie visited the office to assess what might be transferred to Shropshire Archives. It was intended that members of the Newport History Society would make a start on the sorting and boxing of the material after Easter, but again, this had to be put off to the latter part of the calendar year.

We have continued to co-operate with the Newport History Society. A survey of the medieval burgage plots of Newport was undertaken by Wendy Horton with local volunteers on two Sundays at the end of the Summer and with the help of a small grant from Newport Town Council. The frontages were measured and assessed as to whether statutory or customary. The report can be found at <https://wp.me/PR9ve-16Y>.

A small group of local volunteers has worked on transcribing pre-1650 inventories. The History Society's architectural reports on many of the properties on the High Street and St Mary Street were digitised during the year.

The Newport mummers play was revived at the end of 2019 with a sell out evening arranged by Linda Fletcher, and which included English folk songs. Over £1,000 was raised for Shropshire VCH. Efforts are being made to think of novel ways to raise funds for the Newport project.

It is a matter of record that at the end of the year we had still not received an answer from VCH Central Office about whether or not they would accept a Newport short along the lines outlined in the Scoping Study prepared in 2019. Nonetheless, it remains our intention to produce a comprehensive history of Newport along the lines of the Wem short.

Public activities

Dr Everard gave a lecture on our plans to the Oswestry and Borders History and Archaeology Group in October and on our findings to the Northwood and Newtown History Group in late January. She also made a presentation on our plans for Wem Rural to Wem Rural Parish Council in December 2019.

It may be seen how many of the achievements we had anticipated we would be able to report on this occasion have had to be pushed back into 2020-21. Richard Hoyle took the opportunity of partial reopening of the National Archives and the Shropshire Record Office to visit both in August 2020 to try and resolve some of the many outstanding queries which had accumulated over the previous few months. Whilst many commentators say that nothing will ever be quite 'normal' again, we hope to restart the work of research, writing and publication in the last quarter of 2020 and to bring forwards in a final form some of the text which was largely ready at the end of 2019.

1 October 2020