

VCH Shropshire Annual Report 2020-1

The VCH Shropshire county committee has pleasure in presenting its report for 2020-1.

This has been the second year in which we, as much any other part of society, has suffered from the disruption wrought by the pandemic. There have been periods in which all libraries and archives have been closed to readers. As the restrictions imposed during lockdown were relaxed, both reopened on limited terms – shorter days, pre-ordered documents and in some cases the rationing of seats and documents for readers. It was not possible for our architectural historian to access the inside of buildings even after she was allowed to leave home and scrutinize their exteriors. Progress has been slower than we wished but we are not without our achievements.

Wem

Our major achievement has been the completion of the draft histories for eight of the Wem Rural townships. With one exception these were all townships which lacked earlier histories so the research effort undertaken by Dr Everard was prodigious. The drafts also include accounts of the buildings by Wendy Horton. Dr Everard has also prepared an introduction. The whole can be found on the VCH Shropshire website at <http://www.vchshropshire.org/WemRural.html>

As we say, this is a notable achievement. The County Committee thanks Dr Everard for going far beyond what it might reasonably have expected. However, we make no bones about the fact that these texts are drafts. Whilst we have posted them on our website to make them immediately available, we also invite comment, whether to point out errors or to suggest amendments. It is also our intention to add in further material in the future. The drafts also need maps drawing and other illustrations adding.

Whilst we have work to do on the remaining townships, we do need an influx of funds to allow us to make it possible to commission further research on Wem Rural from Dr Everard and Ms Horton and at the moment we have no clear sense of where that might be found. We welcome suggestions – and donations to help us complete this work.

Shrewsbury

Our work on Shrewsbury has been particularly delayed by the Pandemic.

The final revisions to the Gazetteer of Nonconformist Chapels and Congregations by Rosemary Thornes, Lyn Leach and Jonathan Davies, which builds on earlier work by Mrs Janice Cox, has been delayed by the limited access over the year to Shropshire Archives. At the year end it was substantially complete except for a handful of missing references, page numbers and the like. It is expected to appear towards the end of 2021 or early in 2022.

Professor Hoyle's short account of the Public Preachers threw up so many problems with the received wisdom about the early history of the office that it grew into a full-length paper which is expected to appear in the *Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society* in 2022. A new and much shorter account of the public preachers will be drafted later in 2021.

Two short pieces for Shrewsbury Part Two were posted at the end of 2020 including one on boundaries originally drafted by the late Bill Champion.

At the end of the year our researchers were engaged on the parish churches section of Part Two and we hope that this can be made available on our website by the end of the year. Unfortunately it seems unlikely that we can issue this as a separate publication in advance of

the Red Book as was our intention. Dr Penny Harris has kindly agreed to contribute the section on nineteenth- and twentieth century Anglican churches.

Newport

In general our work on Newport this year has concentrated on gathering material. The transcript of the Valuation Office returns was finalised and Geoff Culshaw has pursued some of the more prominent landowners into a variety of ancillary records. John Ravenscroft continues to manage a small team of inventory and will transcribers. Text was drafted on the Newport mills in late 2020: this was put to one side until it was possible to have access to archives again and whilst the additional material has been gathered, we have not yet returned to the text to make revisions.

Publications

We have no printed publications to report this year. But, as previously noted, the end of the second lockdown allowed Dr Everard to complete the accounts of the Wem townships and these will now be found on the website. And, some small sections of Shrewsbury Part Two were added to the website at the end of 2020.

We had exhaustive conversations with VCH Central Office in the autumn of 2020 about future publications. Our plans have been derailed however by the discovery that the Marc Fitch Fund, who are important donors to us, do not permit the publication of the research they sponsor as VCH Shorts, so plans for the expeditious publication of some parts of our research in paperback form has had to be abandoned.

Transcription

Having been caught by the first Lockdown, we anticipated the second by photographing material in Shropshire Archives and the National Archives to transcribe when people were forced to keep close to home. Whilst a number of individuals answered our call for volunteers, it is appropriate to mention here Janice Cox, Peter Everall, Malcolm Price and Tony Ostrowski who did the lion's share of the transcription. Mrs Cox, besides transcribing, also cast a careful eye over the efforts of others. Our thanks go to all the volunteers but especially this quartet.

The aim of the transcription project – other than taking advantage of Lockdown – was to generate a body of material for our use in the future. But we will also make the transcripts available through the website as a public resource.

A number of sources were tackled. We have transcribed the returns of non-conformist licences made by the Bishopric of Lichfield, by Shropshire Quarter Sessions and Shrewsbury Quarter Sessions to the Registrar General in 1852. These returns are not well known and have only recently become available to researchers. They draw together material in a convenient format which may not survive elsewhere. Unfortunately the Shrewsbury return was poorly executed by the clerk who made it and is of much less value than we hoped.

The team also transcribed seventeenth-, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rates for Newport and Chetwynd and a number of smaller documents. In a separate project Linda Fletcher and Nicky Huish transcribed the text of the surveys of Newport, Longford, Church Aston and Edgmond, the estates of the Earl of Shrewsbury, made by William Hill in the 1680s. (Shropshire Archives 81/599.) These are illustrated with maps. The survey book is more complicated than it might seem because it is only a part of the original survey. A further part of it was located at the Herefordshire Record Office whilst other sections remain stubbornly lost, or unidentified. It is our intention to publish the surveys in 2021-2 although exactly how we do this remains to be decided and depends in part whether the missing sections of the volume can be identified.

At much the same time, we were pleased to be able to draw on the services of Tony Carr who checked the texts of a number of Wem documents. These have been posted on the website, again as a service to other researchers. We are most grateful to Mr Carr for his work which made this this possible.

We would welcome the formation of a small transcribing team to work in the first instance on a number of Shrewsbury Sources. We can supply images so that transcribers do not need to be in Shropshire or even Britain. Please get in touch if you would like to be involved.

Personnel

In November 2020 we lost our Treasurer, Dr Chris Fountain, not to Covid but to an ailment which in other circumstances would have been treated sooner and in all likelihood successfully. We send our condolences to his widow, Alison and to his family. We greatly miss him for his sage advice, his commitment to the project and for his good company and conversation.

Nigel Hinton kindly stood in as treasurer on Chris's death, but we were most fortunate that Mary McKenzie offered to take on the role on her retirement from Shropshire Archives. We were also delighted to secure Dr Cathryn Ross-Talbot as our secretary. We now have a strong executive team which we hope will serve us for many years.

We were sorry to lose Professor Tim Jenkins from the committee on his move to Canada at the beginning of 2021. Our connection with University Centre Shrewsbury is maintained through the co-option to the committee of Dr Morn Capper.

Funding

Accounts for the year are presented as an annex to this report. As in previous years we are grateful to the Walker Trust for their support. Obviously the expenditure on research is rather lower in this year than it would have been if we had been able to proceed as we intended. Nonetheless it will be noted that our expenditure exceeded our income. We are not concerned by this: it is only to be expected that our reserves will, in the course of time be spent on research. And it must be conceded that 2020-1, a most abnormal year, was a chill one in terms of fundraising. We made a number of applications and approaches, all of which proved to be fruitless. Indeed, one parish council who we approached in general terms for their support refused to give us any money before we had asked for any! We hope that in this respect 2021-2 will be a better year in which funders – both corporate and individual – have greater confidence in the future and are more willing to support us than in the present.

After a thin year in 2020-1, we hope that 2021-2 will be marked by the completion of some substantial sections of our project: the publication of the Shrewsbury Nonconformists gazetteer, the completion and publication on the web (at least) of the Shrewsbury parish churches text and the appearance of the first sections of our work on Newport. We hope that 2021-2 will be the bumper year that we envisaged in an earlier annual report.

9 October 2021