

VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY SHROPSHIRE LTD

Annual Report 2023-4

I have pleasure in presenting my report as chair of VCH Shropshire Ltd for the year ending 31 August 2024.

This has been another year of steady progress towards our targets on a number of fronts, and if the outcomes seem unspectacular, the months following the end of the year will see the appearance of some significant publications, first of all Dr Everard's *Early Records of Newport* and then the publication on our website of a substantial amount of newly-researched material on the Wem townships of Edstaston and Coton. In addition, much material has been gathered and text drafted on the history of Newport. We have also opened up a new front with work on Bicton which it is intended will form a standalone publication published under the Victoria County History imprint. We have also taken important steps to improve our publicity and social media profile.

To take each area in which we have been active in order:

Shrewsbury

With both Dr Everard and Ms Horton diverted to Wem Rural for parts of the year and then in the case of Ms Horton to Newport, less has been achieved on Shrewsbury than might have been hoped. Several pieces have been completed and posted on the website including Paul Sutton's account of the Copthorne barracks and other military sites in the town and Professor Hoyle's discussion of the Public Preachers. Others remain in draft. Professor Hoyle drafted but has not been able to complete his account of the Catholic church in Shrewsbury and gathered much material on the tangled history of the restructuring of the Church of England's parishes in Shrewsbury between the 1960s and 1980s. He also devoted much time to the boundaries of the Shrewsbury parishes outside the towns: a good example of something which everyone knew (and understood) at the time but which is now hard to recover.

Wem

The Trustees decided that it should commission Dr Everard to complete the account of Edstaston and Coton and asked Wendy Horton to prepare the parallel text on the buildings. Drafts from both authors were received before the end of the year but the finalisation of the texts and their publication will follow in 2024-5.

This part of north Shropshire is, from the historian's point of view, *terra incognita*. No modern historian has ventured there. The accounts are therefore pioneering and will excite much interest when published.

Newport

Over the year we have undertaken work on Newport at all historical periods.

Judith Everard has gathered all the readily discoverable sources for the medieval history of the town for an edition of the records (*Early Records of Newport*). This was drawing to a conclusion at the end of the year and it is expected that copies will be available for sale at the Annual Meeting in October.

The majority of the records are charters. There is no medieval archive of the borough and only a small manorial archive. What remains is widely scattered between a number of

collections, some at Shropshire Archives, others in the estate records of the Earls of Bradford at Raby Castle in county Durham, seventeenth-century transcripts in the British Library and a scatter of documents at the Staffordshire Record Office. In all, just over 500 documents have been found: these are catalogued and fully described in the volume.

Whilst editions like this are not without precedent, nothing like it has been attempted before for Shropshire. It was made possible by a grant from the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society and a supplementary award from the Marc Fitch Fund towards research expenses and publication costs.

We have agreed with national VCH to publish a Newport 'short' in their series (although the series no longer carries that name). It will focus on Newport's townscape and buildings. It will not be a full account of the town (which will follow in the projected 'red book'). Rather, it will concentrate on explaining what it is possible to see and experience, including the layout of the town and its buildings. Wendy Horton is the lead author on the latter and over the year prepared detailed accounts of the parish church (which has been much altered over the years by successive refurbishments) and the Catholic church of St Peter and St Paul at Salter's Hall. She then moved on to look at the public and civic buildings of the town. Richard Hoyle has been researching aspects of the town concentrating on its 'improvement' in the mid-nineteenth century. A trial run of some of his conclusions was presented in a lecture to the Newport and District History Society in September and then repeated to the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society (both after the year end).

In our work on Newport we have been greatly assisted by members of the Newport and District History Society. Wendy Horton assisted the Society with its projects on Pubs and Inns. We are delighted to have the continuing support of Linda Fletcher. Geoff Culshaw and others have been exploring the houses of Chetwynd End. Lorraine Heighway has continued her trawling through the minute books of Newport UDC for material. We are grateful too to Shropshire Archives for their work in trying to bring order to the voluminous records of Liddle and Heane, the defunct Newport solicitors.

Bicton

Paul Sutton has started work on what we hope will develop into a 'short' on Bicton. This may be thought to be simply a suburb of Shrewsbury but it is an area with long roots far pre-dating its urbanisation. The modern civil parish of Bicton has absorbed parts of the neighbouring parishes as Bicton expanded, and so the project, which is still in the planning stage, will doubtless come to encompass all the parishes around Bicton. This is an exciting new development which we look forwards to reporting on in next year's report.

Transcription

Janice Cox has continued to transcribe for us, completing the transcription of the extracts from the lost Shrewsbury Corporation minute books made by James Bowen (d. 1774) and now in the Bodleian Library, and a parish memoranda book for Newport.

Gazetteer of Nonconformist Chapels in Shropshire

The company which had provided hosting for Mrs Cox's online Gazetteer gave notice during the winter of last year that they were closing their hosting facilities. VCH Shropshire was happy to accept responsibility for the site and so it moved to our domain where it is freely available. We are grateful to Catherine Glover for effecting the move.

Meetings

The only meeting we held during the year was the Annual Meeting on 28 October when we welcomed Dr Lloyd Bowen of the University of Cardiff who spoke on 'Preaching, Publishing and the Puritan Underground: Shrewsbury's Godly Community, 1600-42'.

The committee has expressed some anxiety about this meeting. We remain committed to an annual reporting meeting, but we also feel that we should charge and cover our costs (and ideally make a surplus to support our primary activities) by making a notional charge. We do so at a time – post-Covid – when attendance at meetings of this sort is down. This poses a common but not easily resolvable dilemma. To charge, or not to charge? We continue to watch the situation.

We have continued to offer lectures to local societies. Dr Everard spoke on her Newport research to the Newport and District History Society in October 2023 and to the SAHS in November, CSMA/Boundless in May 2024 and Newport U3A in September. She also conducted SAHS members round Edstaston when the Society visited in June 2024.

Publicity

We welcomed Emma Stones to the committee as our publicity/social media officer. Emma quickly established a Facebook page for us and has taken charge of the dormant X (Twitter) account. She is doing splendid work raising our profile. We urge everyone to keep an eye on our Facebook page and Twitter feed.

There still remains room for traditional forms of publicity. We have long felt the need for a short guide to who we are, what we do and why we are worthy of peoples' support, which could be circulated within the county and given to people at lectures and meetings. We were therefore grateful to secure from Harris Allday a grant to produce a small booklet or pamphlet for distribution explaining our contribution to discovering and understanding the history of the county. This can be downloaded from the website, but we also hope that it will become a familiar sight and will help us inform new audiences of our work.

Personal

The Officers of the company continued in post without change. The County Committee has been augmented by two new additions during the year. The first – Emma Stones – we have already mentioned. The second was Paul Sutton – again mentioned earlier - who is taking a sabbatical in Shrewsbury from his normal home in Australia and wished to gain some hands-on experience of English local history, having previously been a student of the subject from afar. He accepted our invitation to write an account of Copthorne barracks and the other military locations in Shrewsbury. He has now moved onto looking at the history of Bicton where we envisage a future 'short' under his authorship.

Judith Everard and Wendy Horton both continued to research and write for VCH throughout the year. In May though Dr Everard informed the committee that having accepted a research post at the University of East Anglia and work with Oxford University Press, she would be unable to accept any further contracts from VCH Shropshire. The Trustees wish to say publicly how grateful they have been to her over the past few years for her research and writing – the first deep and penetrating, the second detailed and written with clarity. Much of the progress that we have made has been down to her commitment to the project. Happily she will continue to live in Shrewsbury. She has accepted our invitation to join the county committee so we will continue to benefit from her knowledge of the sources and her experience of researching and writing.

Funding

The year has been notable for donations. We received £5,000 from the Walker Trust as in previous years for which we remain grateful. EFG Harris Alday gave us a donation of £500 towards the preparation and printing of the pamphlet we discussed earlier. We are most grateful to them for making the pamphlet possible. But we also received a very sizeable donation from Paul Sutton of £15,273 for research and writing, and we are deeply indebted to him.

Overall the total income was £24,134, an increase of £5,248 on 2022-3. The events income, from the Annual Lecture, was less as we charged for the event. The Gift Aid increased due to an earlier donation from Linda Fletcher.

We continue to run a very lean operation with virtually all our expenditure being devoted to payments for research and writing. Expenditure on room costs and the website was less than last year, although there was an increase in expenditure on research – £20,755 in this financial year, and £14,763 last year. The total expenditure was £21,809, about £6,000 more than last year.

The balance is made up of the stock of Wem books and the cash in the bank. £10,000 of the cash is in restricted funds for Shrewsbury part two. The total is £48,667. The previous year it was £46,342.

The Trustees are grateful to Sue Tarr for acting as our examiner and giving advice on a number of points over the year.

Professor Richard Hoyle
Chair VCH Shropshire Ltd
24 October 2024
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