VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY SHROPSHIRE LTD

Annual Report 2024-5

I have pleasure in presenting my report as chair of VCH Shropshire Ltd for the year ending 31 August 2025.

This has not been as successful a year as 2023-4. On 5 November 2024 we were warned (in advance of a public announcement) that Shropshire Archives would only be open to readers one day a week throughout 2025. We wrote jointly with the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society to the Leader of Shropshire Council to object, but to no avail.

This curtailment of access to original materials, both printed and manuscript, has coloured our year. Of course, we understand all too well the reasons for this severe reduction in hours. We look forward to a normal service being reinstated in 2026 (although we do not yet know whether promises made in late 2024 to do so will be honoured). We would like to place on record our appreciation to the staff of Shropshire Archives for their best endeavours in trying to make the reduction in opening hours work as best it could.

We have therefore not made the advances that we envisaged. That said, as we record below, we have not stopped making progress although there has been an element of marking time over the year.

Shrewsbury:
At much the same time as we received the announcement that of the reduced opening hours at Shropshire Archives, we appointed Dr Hannah Robb to complete work by the late Bill Champion on the Shrewsbury Guilds using a donation from Bill's widow, Penny Champion. Limited access to the records has made this a more protracted research effort than we envisaged. Other parts of the Shrewsbury volume have come to completion including accounts of the Shrewsbury Races and Racecourse and the Horticultural Society by Sara Downs. Dr Everard returned to the fray and started to prepare accounts of the medieval Shrewsbury hospitals.

On one important matter, we received Bill Champion's working papers from Penny Champion. These remain the property of VCH Shropshire but through the courtesy of Shropshire Archives they are housed in the Chitty Room of the Archives. Bill appears to have looked at everything: his notes are therefore an important way of accessing the records of medieval (and sixteenth-century) Shrewsbury held both at Shropshire Archives and at the National Archives. A catalogue is available. Anyone wishing to access the materials should in the first instance approach VCH Shropshire.

Newport:
Wendy Horton has continued her work on the buildings and landscape of Newport. Draft texts on have appeared on the website on Salters Hall (and the Catholic church of St Peter and St Paul), the Royal Victoria Hotel and the Booth Hall: the first two included accounts of the building and its history were combined efforts by Ms Horton and Professor Hoyle. The account of the Booth Hall offers a well-evidenced explanation of where this building once stood. Other texts close to being finished at the year end included Victoria Park and the English School. The former draws on materials from the deed room of Telford and Wrekin Council, and here we acknowledge the assistance of Sharon Tipping of Telford and Wrekin

Council and our good friend and supporter, Councillor Tim Nelson of Newport. Much material was gathered on other aspects of Newport's history including the burgesses and other areas of local government, the last chiefly from records at the National Archives.

Fiona Sheridan researched an account of the Newport water supply and Sandra Crabb an account of the Newport gas supply. Judith Everard drafted text on the history of Newport's public houses. Geoff Culshaw and a number of colleagues completed their research on the houses of Chetwynd End. Lorraine Heighway completed her invaluable abstracts of the minute books of Newport UDC.

We should also record that working with funding from the Shropshire Archaeological and History Society, Shropshire Archives have made good progress in making more readily accessible the substantial deposit of records from the defunct Newport solicitors firm of Liddle and Heane.

Wem:
One of the objects for the year was to finalise the VCH account of Edstaston and Coton – a substantial piece of work and pioneering, largely complete and only requiring editing. We were blown off course on this by the invitation to view a body of material on Edstaston House – a now demolished building but one of some prominence in the village – which it was not possible to do before the year end, and so we will now be publishing the draft text in the last weeks of 2025.

Bicton (and surrounding areas):
Paul Sutton reports: Progress has been good this year despite limited access to Shropshire Archives. To date I have researched and written a first draft of sections on boundaries, the landscape, Civil Parish governance, the ecclesiastical parishes of Bicton and Oxon & Shelton, as well as the descent of manor (and later estates) for Crow Meole, Bicton, Shelton and the Rossalls. Research of other areas is on-going as well. This year, apart from the Shrewsbury archives, I have visited the Bodleian Library, British Library, National Archives, and Lambeth Palace archives. I hope to have the bulk of the research completed in 2026 and finalise the text in 2027.

Meetings:
We welcomed one of the founders of VCH Shropshire, Dr James Bowen as our speaker at the 2024 Annual Meeting where he gave an address on 'Cottagers, Common Land and Common Rights in Shropshire, 1500-1900'.

Dr Everard spoke on the comparisons between Wem, Newport and Oswestry on 14 February 2025 to the Oswestry and Borders History and Archaeology Group (OBHAG). Richard Hoyle summarised a great deal of our research on Newport in a lecture on improvement in the nineteenth-century Newport which he gave to the Newport History Society and repeated to the Shropshire Archaeological and District History Society in September 2024.

The Newport society ran a very successful fund-raising event for our benefit with the TV personality Thomas Forrester in October 2024.

Transcription:
We are grateful to Nicola Young for typing the extracts from an otherwise lost Shrewsbury diary by John Tarbuck which appeared in *Shropshire Notes and Queries* in 1886. The diary gives valuable evidence for Shrewsbury between 1783 and 1796.

Personnel:
As we mentioned before, Dr Hannah Robb joined the VCH team at the end of 2024. Sara Downs was commissioned to write a number of sections of VCH Shrewsbury which she will do after the submission of her thesis. We continue to miss Dr Everard's contribution but she has been persuaded back to write the account of the hospitals of the medieval town. Wendy Horton continued to draft material on the buildings and townscape of Newport. Richard Hoyle had to let other professional commitments take precedence over the summer of 2025 but has continued to research and draft text on Newport. Paul Sutton has continued his exploration of Bicton and its neighbouring townships. Given the limited access we have had to original records, it did not seem worth attempting to strengthen the team further after Dr Robb's appointment.

We have an important change in officers to report. Mary Mckenzie told us of her intention to stand down as Treasurer from the 2025 AGM. Thankfully she will remain as a Director of VCH Shropshire and continue to serve on the county committee. We were fortunate to secure the services of Tim Beech as her successor and he has become a Director of VCH Shropshire. Tim has recently retired from a career in regional broadcasting: if his voice sounds familiar, then there may be a reason. The formal changeover will take place at the Annual Meeting in October 2025. We are very grateful to Mary McKenzie for acting as our treasurer and delighted to welcome Tim as her successor. We were sorry to lose Emma Stones as our Social Media manager after she moved into fulltime work. We are grateful to her for setting up and managing the Facebook page. We hope to recruit a replacement before too long and would be delighted to hear from anyone willing to take on this role.

Otherwise the Directors of VCH Shropshire Ltd and the members of the county committee remain as they were. We are always interested in meeting with individuals who would like to contribute to our work, either by joining the county committee or by researching on our behalf.

Funding:
We received £5,000 from the Walker Trust as in previous years for which we remain grateful. Overall, the total income was £7,615, a reduction on last year when we received a number of one-off donations. The events income was increased due to the success of the Thomas Forrester event in Newport held in October 2024, and we are very grateful to Linda Fletcher and members of the Newport History Society for their support. Gift Aid was reduced in proportion to the reduction in donations for which Gift Aid could be claimed.

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 in line with last year. One off costs included £461 on the advertising brochure (funded by Harris Allday), £309 on advertising for the recruitment of a researcher, as well as £870, our support towards the publication of the Newport Charters volume (the unspent balance of a Marc Fitch Fund grant). We spent less on research this year due to capacity and availability of researchers. At the year end we had £8600 committed to our researchers for work contracted but not at that time completed.

The total expenditure was £10,953, a little over half compared to last year. It was decided to write off the value of the Wem book stock (£345) as these were paid for in 2022. The current balance is £45,329. £10,000 of the cash is in restricted funds for Shrewsbury part two and £2,000 as a reserve. Last year the balance was £48,667. The Directors are grateful to Sue Tarr for acting as our examiner and giving advice on a number of points over the year.

Varia
It is worthy of comment that an initiative by British Newspaper Archives at the year end has vastly increased the range of Shropshire newspapers available online. This now includes the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* from 1772 to 2004 (albeit with gaps), the *Shropshire Star* from 1965 and the *Newport and Market Drayton Advertiser* for much of its publishing history from 1855 amongst others. This enhanced access has already made it possible to resolve some intractable problems, but it also means that much of what we have prepared could be amplified and corrected.

We hope that 2026 will see the blockage on access to Shropshire Archives lifted and that it will be the year in which a great deal of the backlog of draft and incomplete text, especially on Newport, will be brought to completion and published on the website.

R. W. Hoyle
Chair, VCH Shropshire Ltd
22 October 2025

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