

# VCH Shropshire

## Annual report for the year ending 31 August 2016

This, the first annual report of the Shropshire VCH County Committee, really extends over a period of two years and begins with the launch of the first volume of VCH Shropshire VI, *Shrewsbury part one* in Shrewsbury on 24 October 2014. Given the interest which the publication of this volume attracted, the Central Office of VCH (then directed by Professor Richard Hoyle) felt that there was probably sufficient support in the county to canvass a relaunch of VCH activities there. Central Office could also draw on the support and contacts of Dr James Bowen. After discussions within and without the county, a meeting to assess the degree of likely support was convened at the Shropshire Archives on Saturday 2 May 2015. This was well attended and resulted in a decision to proceed, and the formation of a provisional committee.

A launch meeting was held in the Shrewsbury Guildhall on 31 October 2015. This attracted a large and enthusiastic audience of 200 or thereabouts, which heard presentations by Professor Hoyle on the ambitions of the new VCH committee and lectures by Professor Keith Lilley (Queen's University Belfast) and Dr Barrie Trinder.

The year since then has been a very busy one for the committee. As will be explained, it has put its activities on a proper legal basis (and has recently applied for charitable status) whilst launching a new campaign of research in the north of the county centred on Wem.

### **Committee**

After initial changes in personnel, a strong and well-motivated committee has emerged. James Bowen initially acted as secretary but Sarah Lane accepted the committee's invitation to join the committee as secretary in May 2016. The committee is grateful to James for steering the committee through its first few months and to Sarah for taking over its management. Nigel Hinton has been treasurer throughout and undertook the practical work of setting up bank accounts. Publicity has been handled for us by another committee member, Nigel Semmens, who has succeeded in securing a high visibility for our name and activities throughout the county. This includes features in the *Shropshire Star* and other local newspapers and coverage with BBC Radio Shropshire.

The project has set up a Twitter feed ([https://twitter.com/VCH\\_Shropshire](https://twitter.com/VCH_Shropshire)) which is regularly updated and the county page of the national website (<http://www.victoriacountyhistory.ac.uk/counties/shropshire>) has been revised and features recent news.

We are in the process of building a new stand-alone website [www.vchshropshire.org](http://www.vchshropshire.org).

We were also delighted that all the individuals we approached to serve as patrons of VCH Shropshire readily agreed to do so. Our patrons are Sir Neil Cossons OBE FSA FMA, Sir Algernon Heber-Percy KCVO, Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of Shropshire, Lady Lydia Forester, Sir Keith Thomas MA, FBA and Dr Barrie Trinder MA PhD FSA.

Throughout we have also benefitted from the support of Mary Mackenzie and the staff of the Shropshire Archives without whom few (if any) of our achievements would have been possible.

### **Constitutional position**

One of the main tasks of the newly formed committee has been to give the committee's activities legal form and apply for the charitable status which is needed to access certain categories of funds. The formation of the limited company and the reshaping of its aims to comply with charitable company's legislation has been undertaken by Nigel Hinton with the assistance and advice of David Saunders and support of the other directors. The committee is enormously grateful to Nigel and David for undertaking this work.

Victoria County History (Shropshire) Limited was formed on 7 August 2015. This ensures that the committee is not personally or individually responsible for the liabilities of the organisation in the event of a catastrophic failure or financial disaster or legal claim. The application for charitable status was approved by the director trustees on 21 October 2016 and has been submitted to the Charity Commissioners

The six trustee directors are members of the company and their appointments were approved by the committee. They are responsible for ensuring good governance of, and appropriate conduct by, the organisation. They are Nigel Hinton, Richard Hoyle, Tim Jenkins, David Saunders, Nigel Semmens and Penny Ward.

The aims of the limited company are given in the appendix.

The treasurer as the chairman of the board of trustees will, of course, advise and inform the committee as to the commitments it can reasonably make with the funds in hand and expected.

It is not intended that the company will become a society with membership. The intention is that there will be an annual meeting at which a report will be presented and, in future years, accounts, and nominations will be invited for membership of the county committee.

## **Funding**

Anyone familiar with the difficulties that Shropshire Council faces in maintaining its museum service will recognise that there is no prospect of securing significant local authority funding for a relaunched VCH in the county.

The committee has made a number of approaches to charities for funding over the year and has been fortunate to secure funding over three years from the Jean Jackson Trust and over a single year (which we hope will be renewed) from the Walker Trust. We are most grateful to the trustees of both charities. We were also delighted to receive a grant from the Shropshire Archaeological Society's Pagett Fund. Unfortunately, other applications to charities and applications to private companies have been unsuccessful. However, we still hope to attract private sector sponsorship. We also hoped that we could enter into a partnership with one of the higher education institutions active in the county, but our negotiations have not been fruitful to date.

We have also received a number of donations from individuals and some have been kind enough to set up standing orders. We are grateful to all of them. We would encourage many more of our supporters to do the same, remembering that every contribution, no matter how small, advances us on our way. In general, we can go as fast (or as slow) as our funding allows. We are also interested in hearing from individuals or organisation who would like to commission their own parish history.

## **Research strategy**

The committee has considered how best to go about restarting VCH in the county. We were very mindful of the need for an early publication to build our profile within the county. There

is a part volume of VCH, for Bradford Hundred, which was left uncompleted when the old Shropshire VCH office was disbanded over a decade ago. It is our intention to take up this volume and it is most likely that the first red book to appear under the auspices of the new county committee will be Volume XII part one treating Newport and the Weald Moors. However, the committee accept that the achievement of this objective is two or three person years away,

Accordingly we have decided to research and publish a VCH 'short' (single-place volume) on Wem (town rather than parish) which would allow us to build our profile and show the possibilities of VCH to a new constituency, both potential funders but also supporters. Work is well underway on this and we hope that it will be published in time for next year's annual meeting.

We then propose to take up work on Bradford Hundred and complete the part-written volume. Interest has been expressed by Newport Local History Society in the project and we think that Newport will make an excellent 'short'.

It has also become clear to the county committee that the Central Office of VCH in its present attenuated form is unable to make progress with the second Shrewsbury volume. We have therefore proposed, and our suggestion was accepted after the year end, that we take responsibility for the delivery of this volume. In fact illness has resulted in some contributors dropping out and large sections of the book need to be reallocated to researchers. We will report on this at a future annual meeting.

We continue to harbour ambitions to work on Ludlow in conjunction with the Ludlow Historical Research Group and would welcome suggestions of potential funders.

### **Research Staff**

The awards from the Jean Jackson Trust and the Walker Trust together with smaller awards from the County History Trust, the Pagett Fund of the Shropshire Archaeological Society and Wem Town Council have allowed us to proceed to the appointment of two research staff in May 2016. Whilst we advertised nationally, we considered ourselves fortunate to make two excellent appointments of experienced historians living in or near Shrewsbury: Dr Judith Everard, a medievalist who held a college fellowship in Cambridge and Ms Wendy Horton, a buildings archaeologist.

### **Volunteers**

Volunteers are now integral to the work of VCH, and the roles they can play are myriad and various. At the highest level we welcome volunteers who are willing, either singly or in groups, to contribute well-researched text to VCH in the appropriate style. Many other potential volunteers may prefer to research on our behalf, and here there is a great deal that can be done both in terms of assessing and transcribing original documents in the Shropshire Archives (or elsewhere) or working with the online sources (census, newspaper, wills) which are now available. There are also back office functions that need to be carried out and the committee would welcome being strengthened by someone who was prepared to organise fundraising occasions.

A meeting for potential volunteers, to explain the ambitions of VCH and outline where we could usefully deploy them was held at the Shropshire Archives on 27 February 2016. James Parker has taken the lead in managing volunteers for the committee. Since then a number of volunteers, working either singly or in groups, have taken responsibility for either gathering material – we have a strong group in Wem working on the trade directories for the town – for future use or who have undertaken to submit sections of the Wem short. Wendy Horton has

also convened a group interested in Wem buildings and has led parties measuring frontages in the town (which attracted much local interest). Penny Ward has been working with a group on the nineteenth-century Wem census returns.

The committee is aware that there is a great deal of enthusiasm for VCH, and more potential volunteers than the committee can successfully direct. This is an issue that the committee wishes to reconsider in the new year. Once we have charitable status, then the way is open for us to make an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a dedicated volunteer coordinator.

### **Public activities**

We are committed to making the results of our research as widely available as possible. It was in this spirit that we joined with the Friends of the Shropshire Archives in holding a Wem Day on 26 June at Wem Town Hall. Richard Hoyle, James Bowen and Jonathan Worton all spoke on aspects of Wem's history, and our good friends in the Wem Civic Society took groups round Wem during the afternoon. We had a tremendous and enthusiastic turnout touching 100. We are most grateful to the Friends and to the Wem Civic Society for acting as our hosts.

We will also be launching a VCH Shropshire website during the next year and will circulate details when it is ready.

This has then been an important year – or two years – for VCH in Shropshire. We have put in place a new county organisation and restarted research. By the time of the annual meeting in 2017 we hope to have the first new VCH publication to show you.

Richard Hoyle  
October 2016

## **Aims of VCH Shropshire Ltd**

To promote, extend and advance public knowledge, appreciation and awareness of the history and heritage of Shropshire and for analogous charitable purposes.

To further public education and understanding of the history and historical development of Shropshire and its communities.

To encourage and undertake academic investigation and analytical research and publication into and in respect of the history of Shropshire under the auspices of the Victoria County History of England.

To disseminate knowledge and distribute information and data obtained through historical investigation and analytical research into the history of Shropshire by means of, but not limited to publication in print and by electronic transmission, lectures, workshops and other participative charitable activities for public benefit.

To associate and collaborate with other societies and organisations in Shropshire and elsewhere having charitable aims and objectives identical or similar to those of the Company.

To do all such other things and engage in all such other activities as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the charitable objects of the Company