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VCH Shropshire Update, May 2017

Welcome to this issue of our occasional newsletter. The past six months have been busy and real progress has been made by VCH Shropshire. On the legal front we secured charitable status in April – a process which turned out to be less straightforward than we supposed, but we are pleased that we are now a proper charity, and able to take advantage of the access to funding that charitable status permits. Our Treasurer, Nigel Hinton, took the lead in organising this, with help from David Saunders. The county committee is grateful to both of them.

A second development which might also be called foundational is that we launched a website earlier in the Spring, and for this we are grateful to a good friend of VCH Shropshire, Catherine Glover. The website is still under construction, but we encourage you to take a look (at www.VCHShropshire.org). We are beginning to put the draft text for Shrewsbury part two on the site where it will form a public resource until published. Of course, we welcome additions and corrections to the text and invite our readers to help us improve what has been written before it is fixed in print.

But most of our time and energy has been invested in Wem, which turns out to be every bit as interesting as imagined, and perhaps more so. Wem has not been without its historians in the past, but one of the hallmarks of VCH is its accuracy and precision and so that Judith Everard – who has taken the lead in all matters Wemian – James Bowen and I have spent a lot of time trying to pin down in specific terms what has previously been known in general terms. There are some points which continue to elude us. As Judith describes, we have been royally assisted by a team of

researchers, to whom our thanks.

When we did the Wem day last year, we promised that we would return and brief our friends there about some of our findings, and this we will do on Sunday 18 June. Details follow later in this newsletter and can be found on the website.

The researching and writing phase of our work in Wem is drawing towards a close and we hope to have a complete book within a few weeks. This will then go off to be refereed, which we hope will be a painless process, and then to press. Fingers crossed, we will have copies in the autumn, perhaps even in time for our annual meeting on 28 October. There are things we would like to know more about, so if you have Wem documents under the bed, or if you worked at either the Platt and Swain Cheese Factory or the Milk Marketing Board's factory and have photographs, ephemera or other mementos, we would be delighted to hear from you. After Wem, we propose to go on and write the history of the other townships of Wem parish although this won't immediately result in a printed publication, and then we hope, later in the year, to make a start on Newport.

Finally, advance warning of what promises to be an unmissable occasion. Last October Gareth Williams launched our annual lecture series in fine form. This year Richard Hayman will be our lecturer, talking on 'River Histories: exploring the past on the Severn and Wye' on Saturday 28 October after our annual meeting. Again, details can be found later in this newsletter.

Richard Hoyle
Chairman, VCH Shropshire

A plea for help!

VCH Shropshire can use all sorts of skills – and not merely those of research and writing. One thing we would like is a volunteer to join the committee and take charge of the newsletter. Nigel Semmens does an excellent job of raising publicity for us, but a newsletter editor who can spot possibilities, shout at us and bang on the table until people send them text and then draw it all together would be considerable asset. If you have some or all of these skills (threats and table-banging aren't absolutely necessary!) and would like to join a rising enterprise, do get in touch. We can promise lots of fun, and masses of thanks.

Writing the history of Wem

Wem has been well served by its historians, starting with Samuel Garbet (1684/5–c.1751), curate of Wem and a master of Thomas Adams's School. Two hundred years later, in 1951, 'The Story of Wem' was taken up once more by Iris Woodward, and has been brought right up to date by local journalist, John Dromgool. Like VCH parish histories, these aim to be comprehensive, general histories of Wem parish.

Our aim then has been to synthesise, and complete, the existing work. Whereas 'The Story of Wem' is chronological, the Wem 'short' is thematic, covering topics such as schools, religion and places of worship, transport and communications, breweries and pubs, sport and libraries. We have also added a great deal of material drawn from a wide variety of sources, for example, census data, council minutes, manor court books, parish registers, probate inventories and local newspapers, as well as fieldwork and architectural research.

Garbet's 'History of Wem' means we are exceptionally well informed about Wem in the early modern period – Garbet's own day and a generation or two before. We can go back further, thanks to a detailed survey of the manor made in 1561. But, prior to that, and in contrast with the past 500 years, the first 500 years of Wem's history is remarkably obscure. From when William Pantulf became lord of the manor, soon after 1066, he and his descendants kept a close hold on Wem. Their archive – whatever it contained – is lost. Neither the Crown nor the Church got much of a look-in – and they were the only organisations that kept written records. We have scrutinised such documents as there are, including the sole manuscript of one of the earliest – the survey of North Bradford Hundred c.1289 – preserved in Shropshire Archives. The mystery of the missing market charter may even have been solved...

The VCH project has approached medieval Wem in innovative ways. Spatial analysis techniques from Historical Geography have been applied to study the urban topography by James Bowen, with the generous assistance of Professor Keith Lilley of Queen's University Belfast. Architectural research and fieldwork by Wendy Horton has shed light on the history of the castle and church and the lay-

out of burgage plots. It is now clear that Wem is an archetypal medieval planned castle-town that should take its place, alongside well-known examples such as Devizes, as a town planted by the Norman rulers.

But we have also been busy elucidating the history of Wem in more recent times. For instance we have been looking at the history of some of the more significant houses in the town, not all of which have survived through to the present day. Our work on the manorial history of Wem has resulted in the discovery of a sizeable estate archive of the estate of the Earls of Bradford whilst the estate was in the possession (or rather not in the possession) of John Newport, born John Harrison, the illegitimate son of the third Duke of Bradford (d. 1783), who was declared a lunatic (significantly after he tried to run away to France to join the Young Pretender) and whose affairs were supervised by the Court of Chancery.

Richard Hoyle has been researching the agricultural history of Wem and has been probing the history of the cheese factories in and around Wem.

The VCH Wem 'short' is now nearing completion thanks to the efforts and enthusiasm of many helpers. Essential foundations were laid by the late Sylvia Watts identifying and transcribing important documentary sources both in Shropshire Archives and in the then Public Record Office. We are indebted to Ralph Collingwood for making so much of Dr Watts's work available to us, and to Peter Edwards for sharing with me notes from his research on the area. When the newly relaunched VCH Shropshire asked for volunteers to work on the Wem project in 2016, the response was literally overwhelming. It was not possible for us to take advantage of all the generous offers of assistance, regrettably. Those who persevered with us – James Ballantyne, James Bowen, Martin Carruthers, Eirene Craney, Roger Foreman, Robert Ginder, John Pinfold, William Price, Oliver and Shelagh Richardson, Jeff Sumbler, Rosemary Thornes, Penny Ward and Sue Wilton-Morgan – made valuable contributions from their own areas of expertise. It is also a pleasure to acknowledge the generous and irreplaceable assistance of Tom Edwards of Wem.

Judith Everard

More on Wem...

*Volunteers
outside The
Castle Hotel,
Wem after
surveying
the buildings
along the
High Street.*



As we said earlier, we hope that our work on Wem town will be completed within a few weeks. As we have now accumulated a great deal of knowledge about the townships of Wem parish (and manor), we propose to carry on and do the remainder of the parish (Wem Rural) before turning to Newport. This will be our priority during the summer and autumn of 2017. We welcome donations to help us in this course from people or organisations in Wem Rural (or suggestions as to whom we might turn). In particular we are looking for some financial help to catalogue the Dickin of Loppington archive held at the Shropshire Archives.

The Dickin family were the nearest Wem had to resident gentry. Their archive has been in Shrewsbury for a good number of years but remains uncatalogued. It is quite sizeable – 70 boxes or so. We really need a catalogue to be certain of what is in the archive and, of course, even a rudimentary guide to the contents of the collection would be of great benefit to the Archives and to other researchers in the future.

Can anyone help?



Shrewsbury Part Two

Wem has distracted us from making much progress on Shrewsbury part two. By the time you see this though, the first parts of the draft text should have been posted on the VCH Shropshire website and more will follow over the next few months. Some of the text prepared is now quite old and will need revision: the first text to appear is the more recent work of Judith Everard (on education) and Richard Hoyle (on the more arcane but important question of burial grounds).

We are delighted though that small group has come together to work on Protestant Nonconformity in Shrewsbury, updating text prepared over a decade ago in the light of the new cataloguing and additions to the Shropshire archives which have taken place and the appearance of online newspapers. More on their work in the next newsletter!

News from Shropshire Archives

Saturday Opening

We have reviewed the level of use on Saturdays and have decided to continue with the current pattern of opening on the first Saturday of the month from 10am – 4pm for the coming year until March 2018. You will continue to need to order original documents in advance.

Conservation staff

Andrew Davidson retired as Senior Conservator at the end of March. His successor is Seren Fisher who has over 20 years' experience as a conservator, and has worked in various archives and libraries in London, Birmingham and Leeds.

New Shropshire Archives website

The new Shropshire Archives website is now live. The new site consists of a number of areas: information about us including research and information guides, a much improved online catalogue plus the ability to complete transactions online, such as booking a space in the searchroom and ordering documents in advance.

In order to use all the functions of the website you need to register. This enables you to:

- ❖ Create a wish-list of items
- ❖ Save your searches

❖ Use the secure messaging system to contact us directly

❖ Access downloadable content including those with payments

❖ Order items in advance of your visit

❖ Order copies of documents and other services, such as research services.

We are also changing our readers' ticket to a plastic one which we can print off directly with a photograph included.

Friends events, Summer 2017

14 June Visit to Lilleshall Hall and AGM

18 July Visit to Combermere Abbey (members only)

9 August Guided tour of Bridgnorth

30 September Bishop's Castle History Day

For further details see:

www.friendsofshropshirearchives.org.uk

Mapping Magic workshop

Investigating Stories of Witchcraft and Magic

Saturday **15 July** 11am-1pm Shropshire Archives

An opportunity to learn more about the history of magical belief and practice, from the middle ages to the present day, in Shropshire and beyond, with Dr Simon White, from Oxford Brookes University. **Free:** please book a place at archives@shropshire.gov.uk

A Morning of Wem History

Four short talks on VCH's research into the history of Wem. The meeting is open to everyone interested in Wem, in local history generally and the work of VCH in Shropshire. It is being held at Wem Town Hall on Sunday 18 June. The programme is given below:

9.30 Doors open

10.00 Introduction by Professor Richard Hoyle (Chair, VCH Shropshire)

10.15 'The missing market charter: rewriting the history of Wem,' Judith Everard

10.45 'Understanding the urban landscape of Wem,' James Bowen

11.15 Tea and coffee

11.45 "'The thing was done which the parishioners since wished undone': The developmental History of Wem Parish Church,' Wendy Horton

12.15 'Two centuries of Wem farming,' Richard Hoyle

12.45 Discussion

13.00 Meeting ends

Please register through Eventbrite:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/wem-history-day-tickets-34192153652>

A donation of £5 for this event would be gratefully received to cover the cost of refreshments and advance the work of VCH in the county.

The VCH Shropshire Annual Meeting and Lecture

The VCH Shropshire Annual Lecture will follow our annual meeting, to be held in at Central, Shrewsbury Baptist Church, Claremont Street, Shrewsbury, SY1 1QG on Saturday 28 October starting at 2.00 pm (the lecture at 3.00).

The title of the lecture will be 'River Histories: exploring the past on the Severn and Wye'. The speaker, Richard Hayman, is a freelance consultant archaeologist based in Shropshire, who has published amongst other books, *Severn* (2012) and *Wye* (2016).

Britain's major rivers have a rich heritage that remains under-appreciated. This year's lecture explores some of the ways that rivers have played an important part in our history, with special emphasis on the Wye and Severn. Focusing mainly their 'soft power', the lecture will describe the symbolic importance of their source in the Welsh mountains, how the Severn became a symbol for the nation, why rivers drew hermits to the water's edge, and how rivers have played a crucial role in human conflict.

Please register through Eventbrite:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/vch-shropshire-annual-lecture-tickets-34191858770>

A donation of £5 for this event would be gratefully received to cover the cost of refreshments and advance the work of VCH in the county.

Newport

Newport History Society are excited at the prospect that Newport will be included in the work of the Shropshire Victoria County History. We are aware that the VCH history of Newport was only partly written before the budget for the research and writing for VCH ended in 2002.

Our society has been running since 1983 and since then we have done a lot of work especially on the townscape and have produced a dozen leaflets about different aspects of the town's history ranging from the Anglo Saxon boundary (AD963) to the Great Fire of Newport (1665). Apart from helping to prepare a definitive history of Newport, we relish the prospect of working with the VCH team, who will bring, we're sure, a rigorous approach to our previous research which of course has been achieved by amateurs – albeit very keen ones!

We have started preparing the way by asking Judith Everard to talk to the Society about the

researching and writing of the Wem 'short', and to tell our members about the VCH. Because of the gap in VCH activities in the county, many of our members and Novaportans in general – know nothing about VCH and its work. With this talk and events in the future, we are hoping to inspire members of the public to get involved, which will not only reinvigorate our Society, as well as create a new history of Newport.

Linda Fletcher

It is a great pleasure to welcome Linda to the VCH County committee. We regard this as very important step as we want to have the closest working relationship with the Newport History Society so that we can draw on their local knowledge, expertise and networks, all of which are vital to the success of VCH Shropshire.

