

Friends of Devon's Archives

Acting chairman's address, AGM 2015

It may come as a surprise to some of you to see me presenting this year's chairman's report and not Pete Best. This time last year, my name was not among those put forward to serve on the committee. However, I was co-opted by the committee in January. On 8 February, Pete resigned as chairman and treasurer, somewhat unexpectedly, and at the subsequent committee meeting, it was agreed that I would take over as the Acting Chairman with immediate effect.

This has been therefore something of an unusual year. For a start, your committee members have now had to put up with me for the last eight months. Although I am not completely a 'new boy' – I was on the committee from 2001-7 – much has happened in the eight-year interim period. Not only has the Friends altered, the archive services in Devon have been reorganised to an extent that in 2007 would seem extraordinarily improbable, if not impossible. Even more than this, the whole archive world has changed. I happen to have served as a Member of the national Forum on Archives and Academic Research for the last four years, and thus I am aware of swingeing cuts in local and national archive services. Recently members of the Forum have had to deal with the implications of a publicly recognised local archive in London simply shutting its doors due to lack of money. We have had to look at the likelihood of another major city archive shutting up entirely due to a threatened cut to its core revenue. We have had to discuss the implications of underfunded repositories selling their choice archives, or simply refusing to comply with legislation for the custody of manorial documents. At the same time, we have seen incredible advances and challenges in the nature of digital records managements at local and national level, and unprecedented advances in the digital capture of archival material and its delivery by remote means. I suspect English archives have not been so shaken up over the space of a few years since record offices have been in existence.

All this makes the task of taking over as chairman in mid -year a bit like taking on the role of a performing seal trying to balance on its nose a ball which is rapidly changing into a lead weight. For this reason I am very grateful for the support of the committee and for their agreement to stay on for another term. Continuity is important. I would especially like to thank Graham Parnell, whose long familiarity with the Friends and our accounts has been a great asset. Further special thanks are due to those members of staff at Devon Heritage Centre – Janet, Brian and Deborah and our secretary, Stuart – all of whom have given us an extra helping hand. And I am grateful to those members of the Friends who returned the questionnaire sent out by Pete Best earlier in the year; your responses to that have been useful in gauging the way ahead.

So, what is the way ahead?

Call me boring and old-fashioned if you will, but I believe in having a vision, in setting out that vision, and sharing it with those who can help make it a reality. And my vision is very simple: I want the Friends of Devon's Archives to do *more* of what it has done in the past. I want it to have *more* activities, and raise *more* money. I want it to give more money away – to more and more deserving causes. I want it to publish *more* and advise *more*, and to act as an independent voice for archives more frequently than it has done in the past. And I want it to do all these things for *more* repositories than before – not by being any less attentive to the Devon Archives and Local Studies Service but by being aware that there are more repositories in Devon than those at Sowton and Barnstaple. And I want every member of the Friends of Devon's Archives to feel they can do more for the cause of our heritage in general and our archives in particular.

In support of this vision, I have suggested a few slight changes to the ways things have hitherto been done. First, there are some tweaks required to our constitution, as laid out in the agenda. Second, the committee has agreed that henceforth that two conferences per year will be our default position – one in the spring and one in the autumn – and those conferences will shift around the county between the Exeter region, the Plymouth region and the Barnstaple region so

that two of the three will see a Friends' event every year. The next conference will be in North Devon in the Spring, and in a year from now we will hold our AGM and conference in Plymouth. Two newsletters will be sent out every year, after something of a dry period in the circulation of newsletters. Third, I want to increase the subscription levels so that we can do more purchasing of documents, more publishing, more conservation support and have the money to put forward as a contribution towards a major externally-funded project on Devon Diaries. Fourth, I want the Friends of Devon's Archives to play an active role in supporting the new initiative with Somerset – and to this end I hope that not only will you support the proposal for the Friends to become institutional Founder members but also that you will consider individually becoming members of the Founders' scheme too, paying a sum to help endow the archives and museums services of Devon and Somerset.

I cannot stress too strongly how proud everyone involved with the Friends should feel about our achievements over the years. But nor can I stress too strongly how the threats to local government funding threaten those achievements. We live in an age in which politicians of all persuasions and colours have a present-centric vision of responsibility, and almost no understanding of the damage they can cause – often through no malice – by cutting services to save tax payers' money. They are also incredibly city-centric, and the provinces are a low priority to them. It is important that we use our voices to impress on our leaders that we value archive services very highly, and that they should not be cut. It is also important that we all bolster archival services where we can with our financial support. I have absolutely no doubt that the archive services in this country are more in need of friends – and Friends' organisations – than ever before.

I have already gone on too long but I would like to draw to your attention a few other achievements from the last twelve months. Graham Parnell was successful in negotiating with a vendor to secure a collection of twenty-one eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents relating to the ownership of Bycott Farm, in Halberton, for £175. The Friends of Devon's Archives joined with

the Devon Family History Society in assisting with the purchase by South West Heritage Trust of the diaries of Lewis Burfitt of Ilfracombe, relating to his life in a prison camp in Shandong Province, China, in 1943-5: our contribution amounted to £480. While talking about purchases, I have drawn up – and the committee has approved – an acquisitions policy, making clear when and how we will purchase documents for deposit in a record office, how we define ‘Devon archives’ in archival terms, and in what circumstances and under what conditions we might donate them to local archives as well as local government-funded repositories. I intend to put this policy on our website before long. I know that the administration side of things is not everyone’s cup of tea but such documents are, I believe, essential to the smooth operation of an organisation. Similarly I hope that the Friends will be happy to adopt a few other bureaucratic practices that have helped me with chairmanship in the past. One is that, at the AGM every year, members review the organisation’s constitution as a matter of routine, for the simple reason that these documents quickly become out of date and become cumbersome – as we now find with the clash of dates for the subscription year. I also think we should circulate the minutes of the AGM (including a copy of this Chairman’s report) by email as soon as possible after the end of the meeting, so that everyone present. I do not believe that meaningful corrections are possible after twelve months has elapsed.

Let me conclude by saying that this organisations is in a healthy state, with over 200 members and money in the bank, even though there are greater dangers and challenges in the archive world than we have seen in many years. The opportunities for this organisation to grow and to develop further activities and make new connections are all around us. I hope you will join me in finding some time to devote to the society, so that it truly goes from strength to strength. And please, if you come across Devon documents for sale which you think we should acquire either solely or in conjunction with another organisation acting in the public interest, or if you come across some information of which the Friends needs to be aware, please do let me or the Secretary know.

Ian Mortimer, Acting Chairman, FoDA, 18 October 2015.