

Friends of Devon's Archives

Chairman's address, AGM 2016

I hope you all will agree with me when I say that this year's most positive achievement has been nominating the South West Heritage Trust for the inaugural award of Record-keeping Service of the Year, in respect of its work at the Devon Heritage Centre. Our specific reasons for nominating the Trust were

1. its innovation, vision and professionalism in transforming the archive services in Devon over the last 18 months, and
2. pioneering new methods of collaboratively working across two counties to the benefit of both. This is an exciting and outstanding model for local archive services and related heritage organisations in the future.

These new awards are especially for promoting excellence in the field. Therefore, the very fact that the Trust went on to be selected for the shortlist of five by the Archives and Records Association was tremendously good news in itself. That it then went on to win the award with almost a third of all the votes cast for the five shortlisted repositories was a testament to how much people in Devon and further afield value the work of the South West Heritage Trust, and how much we appreciate the enormous achievement in putting the archive service in Devon on a stable footing after some very rocky times after years of cuts in local government funding. Moreover, it should show fund-awarding bodies that the Trust is getting things right and providing a new model for how archive services can be funded and run. It is especially pleasing that the North Devon Record Office was saved from almost certain extinction by some judicious manoeuvring by the Trust in conjunction with Barnstaple Town Council.

This is not to say that everything is now perfect in Devon – there remains much work to be done at the Devon Heritage Centre; there is the thorny question about the maintenance of funding at the current level after existing agreements come to an end in 2019; and there are the looming crises of the loss of born-digital private files and small-business records, plus the

widespread destruction of property deeds – but we have every reason to be grateful to Janet Tall and her teams at the Devon Heritage Centre and at the North Devon Record Office, and the administrative staff in Somerset, for their exemplary work since the establishment of the Trust in November 2014.

The next positive development is that the Friends have helped with the deposit of six collections of papers in the last year. This is more than in any previous year – I have now drawn up a list and made it available on our website. Two items were the result of purchase: we contributed to the acquisition by the SWHT of a medieval deed relating to Ferers family of Kingston, dated 1384. We also joined with the Devon Family History Society in purchasing the Cullompton Fire Insurance Map, which is a detailed view of the town made for insurance purposes from a survey made July 1831. The other four collections have been secured by the Friends as a result of our long-standing committee member, Graham Parnell, noticing their availability on ebay or being contacted by members of the public. These include

- a collection of deeds relating to Tunnel Estate, Exeter, 1893-1972;
- deeds relating to Holbrook Estate, Ilsington, 1831-1914;
- deeds, correspondence and financial papers relating to the paper mills in Buckfastleigh, Stoke Canon and Silverton, and Watchett in Somerset (18th-20th centuries), including a copy of the will of W.H. Reed, the owner; and
- a manuscript list of air raids in Plymouth, Aug 1940-Apr 1941.

The last item was deposited in Plymouth and West Devon Record Office; the other items are all now in the Devon Heritage Centre.

A third positive development has been the conferences we've held as an organisation. Last year we gathered in the Exeter Guildhall to hear talks by Robin Ravilious on the photographs of her late husband, James Ravilious; Scott Pettit on manorial records; Ellie Jones on medical manuscripts in the Cathedral Archives; and yours truly on how to reconstruct the medieval history

of a settlement when manorial records do not survive. In the Spring we continued our tour of Devon guildhalls with a conference in Barnstaple Guildhall, having the pleasure and privilege of hearing Dr Todd Gray on 'Elizabethan North Devon: Taxation and Revolt'; Peter Christie on 'The church, sex and slander in Elizabethan North Devon'; Dr Janet Tall on 'The wartime diaries of Lewis Burfitt'; Mary Siraut on 'The social history of Exmoor since the eighteenth century'; and John Bradbeer on 'Cod and pottery: the real basis of North Devon's eighteenth century prosperity'.

That is all positive. There is a negative too, and it behoves me to report that too.

I have to say that neither the last AGM and conference nor the conference in Barnstaple – informative and interesting though they were – were well attended. This event is an even clearer example that members of this organisation are not prepared to turn up to meetings – we have barely a tenth of our membership here today and very few apologies. To put it very bluntly, some members don't support this organisation beyond paying their subscription – and (as the membership secretary's report will show), some don't even do that. This lack of attendance is just one of several reasons why I am concerned about the Friends.

A second reason is that, although we asked for a volunteer to step in as Treasurer at the last two AGMs (and possibly more), no one did so – although I am happy to say, that through the good offices of our president, Ian Maxted has said he is prepared to take over the role.

A third reason for worry arose as a result of organising this conference. When I contacted the speakers in September to finalise titles, two told me they were now unable to make the conference. One of them, a professor of history here in Plymouth, who initially confirmed his attendance in January, told me it was because he would have to be babysitting today because his wife had other commitments. Honestly, how can a professor *not* arrange a babysitter with over a month's notice? He would not have given that response if this had been a conference arranged by a university: does this mean our reputation is so low that speakers feel free to cancel for trivial reasons? Is that how academics value looking after their written heritage, as less important than

arranging a babysitter? If so, why are any of us here? Indeed, why do we exist if that is how seriously we are taken by those who are supposed to be on *our* side in the argument about preserving our written heritage?

For this reason, it seems that now is the time to take a deep breath and have a long look at ourselves in the mirror. If we have difficulty attracting volunteers and are *not* taken seriously by academics, the very people who will lose out most if the archives services decline to the point of closure, are we making any difference? Could we streamline ourselves by dropping our non-essential functions? Can any of our functions said to be 'essential'?

As you know from last year's AGM, my vision for this organisation is that it should do more of everything it has hitherto done. But it is simply not possible to do anything more if the rest of the membership leaves *everything* to the most active members of the committee. For this reason, we will discuss our future as part of this AGM later in this morning's proceedings.

Now, in rounding up this year, it only leaves me to thank the committee who have met regularly over the course of the year. I am grateful to them all. But if I may single a few out individually, I am especially grateful to Stuart Tyler, the Secretary, and Peter Towey, Membership Secretary. Among other members of the committee, I am very grateful to Paul Luscombe for taking the committee minutes and Sue Jackson for all her support. And we need to say goodbye to three committee members, Carole Herbert, Derek Jackson and Diane Lewis: I thank them all for their years of service on the committee. I want to say a special thank you to Graham Parnell, who has been on the committee ever since FoDA was established in 1998, and who has been treasurer for every year but one, and, last but by no means least, I would like to thank our president John Allan. Both Graham and John have been enormously supportive and, frankly, this organisation would be in a far worse state if it were not for their steadying hands and wise advice.

Ian Mortimer, Chairman, 15 October 2016