

Friends of Devon's Archives

Chairman's address, AGM 2017

I'm going to begin this year's Chairman's Report where I left off last year, with the same old lament. **We don't have enough people** doing enough things. Last year both the president and I remarked on the low turnout to the AGM in Plymouth: then there were twenty-two members attending out of our total membership of 170. This year we have about the same number here – just over ten percent. You, obviously, aren't the ones to blame: it's everyone else. But also, I have to say, my repeated requests to members to be on the watch for documents being put on sale and for other threats to archives, has not elicited many responses. In fact, the only people who have raised such issues are members of the committee. I've said it before and no doubt it will often be said again, this organisation cannot leave everything to be done by a handful of people. It is not just unfair, it is also inefficient, for two reasons. First, because it's the people who are already busy who have to add FoDA duties to their workloads; and second, because the committee do its job properly its members if they do not communicate with us. FoDA as an organisation cannot protect archives properly if archive users do not report back to us on what is going on in the archive world.

There, having said that, I can now move on to more positive things. And I am pleased to say they *are* more positive, for the lack of communication from our absent friends is really the only problem we face as an organisation.

Many positives came out of the discussion we had last year about the future direction of the Friends. Primarily we instigated a new policy of contacting everyone by **email** and only posting hardcopies of missives to those without email addresses. I can't say it didn't go without a hitch,

due to some unforeseen technical problems, but all is well now. Likewise it has been a very positive move to stop producing hardcopies of the newsletter but to design it for the screen and send printouts to those without email access. This has already saved us hundreds of pounds in printing and postage. It has also allowed us a much greater flexibility in how extensive and illustrated our newsletters can be.

Another online strategy which has proved very positive is our move to **internet banking**. For years our current account, which requires two signatures on every cheque, has proved awkward and inefficient. Now, with internet banking a reality for charities as well as individuals, our treasurer has a far easier time of things than his predecessor.

As you all know, Ellie Jones, an archivist at the cathedral, has joined the committee. Immediately she raised an important point, asking us, who are we *for*? Is it just the South West Heritage Trust and Plymouth and West Devon Record Office? Or do **other organisations** – such as the cathedral – fall within our remit? Obviously, we care about documents in many repositories besides those covered by the Trust and Plymouth City. Therefore the committee resolved in January to reach out to some of the smaller organisations for the purposes of making links, reporting their news to our members, and potentially supporting them with contributions to their collections. As a result, the following archive services are now regularly contacted by our newsletter editor:

- Devon Archive and Local Studies Service (both branches)
- Plymouth and West Devon Record Office
- Exeter Cathedral Library and Archives
- University of Exeter's Special Collections
- Torquay Museum
- Totnes Museum
- Tiverton Museum
- Brixham Museum
- Cookworthy Museum, Kingsbridge.

In addition, our next whole-day meeting will take place at Torquay Museum on 28 April 2018.

Another positive collaboration on which I can report is **our liaison with the Devon History Society**. Following a proposal by Andrew Jones, chairman of DHS, we had two meetings at which we agreed to produce a joint programme from 2018 as well as to present a single voice when speaking out about archival issues, and that members of each organisation would be able to attend events hosted by the other as if they were full members of the other organisation.

Talking of **events**, these constitute another positive aspect of our work on which to report. First, the conference following last year's AGM, although it was not well attended, was well received. The speakers included Louisa Blight on the Plymouth Museum project, now called 'The Box' (somewhat prosaically, if you ask me); Dr James Gregory on Spiritualism in the South West; yours truly on 'Your ancestors' dirty laundry' (this being an account of a dyeing and cleaning company in Plymouth); and, most impressively, Professor Mark Stoyle, whose paper on the Western Rebellion of 1549 was nothing short of a *tour de force*. You may recall how he took the cry 'Kill all the gentlemen', which was supposedly the battle cry of the oppressed peasantry of Sampford Courtenay, and traced it back through the archives to discover that, as far as anyone can determine, it originated with the authorities in London who seem to have assigned it to rebels in Essex and Devon at the same time – for propaganda purposes. In fact the Devon rebels were led by quite a few gentlemen. This demonstrated unequivocally why archives matter: long-held assumptions about the radical social nature of this rebellion could be shown to be false.

Our April meeting was held in Exeter at the Devon Heritage Centre, where the speakers included yours truly again talking about Restoration Britain (sorry about that; you have a bad penny as chairman); Professor Robin McInnes OBE speaking on 'How Historical Imagery can Support Coastal Heritage Management in South-West England' and Deborah Phillips, head

conservator at Devon Archives and Local Studies Service, demonstrating how best to look after archives at home.

On the **acquisitions** front, we had mixed fortunes. On the positive side, an Ebay vendor who refused to sell *intact* a collection of probate material and early nineteenth-century printed election ephemera relating to Totnes – but insisted on selling every item separately – saw every piece but one purchased by FoDA, by Peter Towey and myself, and at a price no greater than we were had offered him for the whole lot. These papers were deposited in the Devon Heritage Centre.

On the downside, in June we heard that five eighteenth-century record books of the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital were going to be auctioned at Ottery St Mary Auctioneers. These were valuable subscription books, recording which aristocratic and gentry households paid for the services of the RD&E and what treatments had been carried out on their behalf. The problem was that we had only two days' notice of the sale: it was necessary to act quickly in coordination with SWHT to arrange a bid. Without seeing the documents – as there was no time – there was a limit to how much we were prepared to offer. I took the executive decision to limit our exposure to £500 in support of a SWHT bid of up to £1,000 hammer price. Unfortunately, this was not enough. Once again, the importance of having eyes and ears on the ground was brought home to us. With sufficient notice, this group of important records could have been reunited with the RD&E collections at Exeter.

One area in which we had unqualified success was with **a new publication**, *Devon Deciphered*, conceived and written by John Booker. This research guide is unique in that all twenty samples are drawn from Devon. It places high-quality facsimiles of manuscripts dating from 1300 to the mid-eighteenth century alongside full transcriptions and explains the historical terminology. Thus John not only demonstrates how the problems of palaeography and language may be overcome

but also provides the reader with a glossary of useful terms and an understanding of the documentary formulae involved. Copies may be obtained from Devon Heritage Centre for the price of £10.00 plus postage and packing.

Outside our own activities, it is gratifying to note that this year saw a number of major archival achievements. Both the South West Heritage Trust and the Plymouth and West Devon Record Office achieved accredited repository status, after rigorous inspection by the National Archives. The Cathedral Library and Archive achieved the renewal of their accredited status for a further term of three years. No less importantly, Scott Pettitt completed the Devon section of the Manorial Documents Register, which went live online in May. That marks a significant advance for local historians, academics and family historians working on Devon themes, and is to be warmly welcomed. It also was a colossal achievement: Devon has the second highest number of manors of any county in the country – second only to Norfolk – and the project was completed on time and within budget.

While I cannot help but feel sorry that relatively few members of FoDA actively contribute to our activities, I trust that the foregoing passages show that our work is useful and appreciated by both those looking after Devon archives and those using them. It is very much with these benefits in mind that I would like to thank the officers and members of the committee: Sue Jackson; Graham Parnell; Richard Spear; Paul Luscombe; our publicity officer and newsletter editor, Ellie Jones; our membership secretary, Peter Towey; our treasurer, Ian Maxted; and our secretary, Stuart Tyler. Stuart is now standing down after six years in the role of Secretary, and I would like to pay tribute to his efficiency throughout my time as Chairman, for this job simply would not have been possible had I not had the support from him that he so willingly gave. Paul too is surrendering his committee mantle, and I would also like to thank him for his dedication. Last but by no means least, I would like to thank our president, John Allan, who again has done

so much for the Friends, and at times has kept the whole show on the road. Thank you John, Stuart, Ian, Ellie, Peter, Paul, Graham, Richard and Sue. You all make this a very rewarding committee with which to work.

Ian Mortimer.