

Chairman's Report

In sitting down to write my last Chairman's Report for the Friends of Devon's Archives, I decided to click on our website and look back at the reports I wrote for the last three AGMs. In doing so, I could not help but notice that in 2015, I enthusiastically announced that I hoped that FoDA would do '*more* of everything' – more events in more places with more newsletters and more purchases, and exerting more pressure on those who have the power to affect the future of our archive services.

Well, in terms of *more*, I have lived up to my stated intention in this respect: each of my reports was longer than the previous one. However, that wasn't what I intended by 'more of everything' – nor is it what most of you would have wanted. I therefore am planning to keep this one short.

The year 2017-18 saw steady progress. We made two purchases of Devon deeds from Ebay; bought a Sidmouth apothecary's notebook from 1830; and contributed £800 towards the Devon Medical Society's acquisition of five medical subscription books from the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital from the 1740s. In addition, we supported further bids by Plymouth and West Devon Record Office and the South West Heritage Trust for archives that got away. However, we also helped the South West Heritage Trust win an £18,000 grant from the National Manuscripts Conservation Trust, to conserve the political correspondence of Henry Addington, Viscount Sidmouth, Prime Minister and Home Secretary, by donating £2,000. On top of these things, we tackled the problem of compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations. We held a very successful Spring meeting at Torquay Museum on 'unwritten archives', which saw presentations from four excellent speakers, and as part of the arrangements for that day, we shifted to the online booking of events through Eventbrite. We have in addition continued to be a voice for archives, raising awareness of their importance to our community and their vulnerability. In particular, we were successful in alerting Torbay councillors to the dangers of following their mayor's plan to cut the last portion of the council's grant to Torquay Museum. Doing so would have sent all the wrong signals to those in a position to help the financially beleaguered institution; it was exactly the opposite of what was needed.

I'd like to think that this positive set of achievements characterises the whole of the last three and a half years that I have been chairman. We have a number of policies in place that were previously lacking. We have maintained a supportive core of members; we have acquired or protected many documents; we have helped the South West Heritage Trust gain recognition for its pioneering work

in administering archives through grants and a prestigious award; we have revamped our constitution and made our administrative processes more efficient. We have published a book on reading and understanding Devon documents; we have reported news of archives and their accessions every six months through our newsletter; we have given advice on archives and the risks to certain forms of data (especially born-digital archives); and we have held two conferences per year involving over twenty speakers in all four 'corners' of the county – Exeter, Barnstaple, Plymouth and Torquay. Behind the scenes we have also dealt efficiently with the bureaucracy generated by HMRC and the Charity Commission, and have continued to maintain our own website and its very valuable resources, as well as the Devon Roll of Honour website put together and edited by Pete Best. We have passed the milestone of being twenty years old. And last but not least, we still have money in the bank. Hooray for that!

Truth be told, however, my policy of wanting FoDA to do more things in more places has not altogether been successful, and I think it is worth dwelling on that for a moment. This is not because of a desire to be self-deprecating but because it is important that we look on that initiative as a learning lesson. Yes, we have made more purchases in the last three and a half years than we made in the previous sixteen and a half of our existence; and yes, we have held more events in more places, as I promised we would. However, we have significantly fewer members now than we had in 2015 – 160 compared with 200. Doing 'more of everything' did not lead to an expansion in our numbers but a twenty percent drop in three years. Moreover, fewer and fewer of our members turn up to meetings. This forces the question, why do we carry on? Ultimately, we do so for the archives and for our successors ability to learn from them and enjoy them. Our purpose is not self-satisfaction or popularity but the preservation and enjoyment of our heritage. There is also the fact that almost every historical society is currently losing members as the generation that supported such organisations moves on and those now in their forties and fifties come to the fore. People of my generation – I am fifty-one, by the way – are much less likely to join a historical organisation, let alone a whole series of them, and even less likely to want to take a leading role in running such organisations. It is not my place to suggest what my successor as chairman should and should not do but doing *less* rather than more, and focusing on the core activity of protecting archives and being a voice for our written heritage, should be given priority over everything else we might do – and thankfully that requires only a dedicated few, not legions of supporters.

Before I sign off, it just remains for me to thank those who have contributed to the running of FoDA over the last year. We have a superb committee who all work hard to keep FoDA going, and I am very glad that almost everyone is staying on: John as president; Frances as secretary; Ian as treasurer; Peter as membership secretary; Ellie as publicity officer; and Sue and Richard as

committee members. The ex-officio members too do a sterling job – Janet Tall, Brian Carpenter, Deborah Philips and Louisa Blight – giving professional advice on matters that concern other archives besides their own. I am very pleased that Sue has agreed to be programme officer for the forthcoming year – a position that has been vacant for too long – and I thank her for that. Also I am very pleased that Katharine Chant has agreed to replace me as chairman. Thank you, one and all, for all you do for archives in Devon.

I cannot go without making a couple of special notices. As you all know, the Friends of Devon's Archives was officially inaugurated on 8 July 1998. You will also be aware Graham Parnell has been a committee member for all that time. Although he cannot be here today, on behalf of the whole membership I would like to stress how grateful we are to him for his service over the twenty years of FoDA's existence. On a personal level too, I would like to stress how grateful I am for his support – he always has a cheery smile whenever turning up to a committee meeting. I have thus sent Graham a book token on behalf of FoDA and myself as a small token of our appreciation for his years as a committee member.

Last but not least, I would like to make a special mention of John Allan's service as president of this organisation. Frankly, without him, we would have been rudderless. He has never stinted on turning up to committee meetings and helping with our visits to historical sites – whether in Barnstaple or Polsloe – and suggesting speakers and contacting people to take on new roles for FoDA. Most of us on the committee are here due to his persuasiveness as much as our experience or love of archives. And although our constitution states that the president should only serve three years, it emerges that he has already done six. And he has agreed to go on longer! What a champion of Devon's heritage he is. For this reason, it gives me very great pleasure, as my last act as outgoing chairman of the Friends of Devon's Archives, to announce that the committee has unanimously agreed to make John an honorary Life Member of the Friends of Devon's Archives. Thank you, John, for all you have done for us, from all of us.

And that, I am pleased to say, is the shortest of my Chairman's reports for FoDA.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve.

Ian Mortimer, Chairman