

Archival News May 14th 2018

An Adventure and A Norse Saga

So, what does one say after 24 years as archivist to Frodsham and District History Society - and how does one say it?

As in all previous years, the archive service has been very busy indeed and most enjoyable, most people know that I relish delving! However, this time I do not intend to record the enquiries but to recall how the society's growing archives moved from pillar to post, and to give you one last intriguing detective story from Norway.

In 1994, Sue Davy and I, as new committee members, were asked to update the existing archive material collected by the late Bill Hawkin and his committee and kept in members' homes until moved into the cellars of Castle Park House. Eventually, a few of us manhandled the acquisitions from the damp cellars to the Mayor's Parlour, part of the now demolished Town Council rooms attached to the House. The Parlour had been a well appointed room for greeting civic guests but by 1994 the vandalised window was boarded, and we shared half of the small dark room with the Arts Centre, having to lock the door whilst working there to prevent weird strangers entering.

For over twelve months, working on hands and knees (the floor being the only work space) we recorded everything, first in longhand and then on to my computer. Practicable decisions were agreed and archive lists were made available to the members. From the original list of 8 A4 pages, the contents of the archives grew steadily and were regularly updated. Padgate College students and individual researchers made good use of the archives for their own projects - a very positive and quiet start before the deluge of donations began.

Sue retired in 2002 because of ill health but offered to help whenever necessary. Over 2003 /04, we searched for short term storage and new premises as Castle Park House was to be temporarily closed and the Mayor's Parlour demolished. The room's electricity was turned off twelve months early and a torch was my only means of light. The Frodsham Forward Team found space in a room near to Devonshire Bakery, so with the aid of a small greenhouse lamp, Sue and I packed everything into boxes ready for the white van man who had to make two trips before the contents were stacked in the back room of the offered shop space.

Almost two years later we moved, yet again, into the tiny room at the top of the restored Castle Park House and the rest is history. Vale Royal staff and Frodsham Forward were more than helpful providing a desk, 3 chairs, a lamp, fitting out the book cupboard and providing space in a basement room. As the tenant, I was also given a fob key which allowed access to the whole building - a daunting responsibility.

The first committee's aims in 1981 were to promote interest, knowledge and enjoyment, and these aims I followed providing access to public research, study, enquiries, exhibitions, articles, reports and contemporary press news items. Over the remaining years, donations adding knowledge about Frodsham families and events have flooded in by person, by post, in suitcases, baskets, carrier bags, boxes and car boots! Several times I have had to climb over full boxes to reach my desk. The late Dr. Philip Dodd's prolific papers had previously taken a small group of us almost two years to document before I was able to file everything away. The late Jim Harvey's boxes, with Joe Barker's wonderful paintings took me a year to document. Arthur Smith's collection from the very first meetings kept coming

and coming, and in 2009 the closing Frodsham High School's history boards, cups, shields and boxes of papers filled the room - and the corridor - such excitement and discovery!

So, history has been gathered from, about and for Frodsham folk. Fascinating enquiries answered from around England, Scotland, Wales, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the USA and Norway all re-connecting families across many generations. The Australian emails have been of especial interest as several enquiries were concerned with finding siblings after children had been shipped out there. In addition to my research, Claire Hayes was able to further their very emotional enquiries.

It is reassuring to donors to know that their family papers and artefacts are safe and freely available in the Archives, so careful decisions have had to be made. For example, if there is a request for a donated item to be returned, a dogmatic 'no' is unrealistic if family circumstances have changed and so I have returned a small cannon (yes!) a cricket bat and ball and three formal photographs of past mayors - all with the agreement of the committee. Other requests have been made for family papers to be in our 'Safe Keeping' and I have documented them as such. Frodsham Town Council has deposited very interesting civic documents in this way. It has been said by a number of people that the History Society's collection is steadily growing into Frodsham's Town Archives.

How times have changed. In 1994 few homes had computers, so the internet, Google, websites and smart phones later transformed the way I worked. The archive lists have been on the internet for some years but the design and breadth of the new Interactive Archive Website, with its burgeoning Time Line and Buildings Map, has taken the society into the future. Steve McEntee, one of the very early committee members, offered to design the website, free of charge, recording all the items that I had documented over the years and producing something new and attractive for the society and the public. It is easy to manage and find your way around but it gave me many sleepless nights trying to make sure everything was transferred to Steve.

Space in the tiny room is now at a premium, but to find another with the original Vale Royal considerations will be challenging. Twice over the years I was invited to official meetings where opening a museum was on the agenda. Nothing came of either meeting when research showed the financial costs were exorbitant-but there is always hope. Maybe, the empty first floor of the old Frodsham High School above the library, will be opened up one day to house the archives-just a thought!

So, these 24 years for me, have been interesting, exciting, stimulating, time consuming, often stressful, but never dull and very active! I have listened, learned, and shared so much history about Frodsham. Much has happened with so many surprises, for example-the 29 letters of 3 love-lorn young Frodsham people between 1907 and 1910; the amusing red herring of the Frodsham Cup; the c1830 Flower Cottage Coat discovery; Jamie Bruce Lockhart,'s (descendent of the Weaver and Abbott Wright families) fascinating correspondence about his famous left wing aunt, Harriet Shaw Weaver and the suffragette movement; so much sombre information concerning The Great War 1914-1918 and the Second World War 1939-1945. All recorded in the public Pink Hardback Files in Frodsham Library, Castle Park House Reception and on the website. The archive room is overflowing with the history of Frodsham's people and events from the 1300s.

However, these years have been dependent on the practical help Richard has given throughout. He has "voluntarily" made things, repaired, printed, copied, photographed, scanned and digitised 1,600+ slides of Frodsham, listened, encouraged, carried heavy

loads to and from exhibitions and ferried me around to find places for enquiries, so he is more than happy that I am giving up! I find it difficult to make him understand just how much I have appreciated everything he has done for me - and for Frodsham History Society!

To my friends whose expertise and knowledge of Frodsham has been so important over these many years - Mrs Dorothy Smith, Nick Smith, Simon Longden, Arthur Smith, Sue Davy, Joan Douglas, Alex Cowan, and more recently Steve McEntee, Heather Powling and Sue Lorimer. I give them, and the ladies of Castle Park House, the Town Council, Castle Park Arts Centre and those I have not mentioned, my very grateful thanks for years of supporting and promoting the archives.

My very best wishes to the new archivist, Gill Baxter, who has been quickly learning the ropes - much enjoyment Gill!

My last report on the intriguing Norwegian Saga follows this article.

I hope there is something of value to show for my 24 years but my adventure has ended. Dylan Thomas's, "Do not go gentle into that good night....." springs to mind!

*My Regards to Everyone,
Kath Hewitt. (Archivist Retired)*

frodhistor/archives.co.uk



The Archive Room and Book Cupboard May 14th 2018.

