

Quantock u3a Local History Group: Visit to Somerset Heritage Centre, July 18th 2022

Thirteen group members came along to the Somerset Heritage Centre in its relatively new, dedicated facility on the outskirts of Taunton. It was billed as being the hottest day of the year so far, and possibly on record, so it was a treat to be in the climate controlled rooms for this introduction to what the Heritage centre has on offer, how you can access their records and a tour of some of the behind the scenes storage areas – some of which were frankly freezing!

Esther Hoyle who is the engagement lead archivist at the centre gave us an introductory presentation in the reading room – which houses high frequency use books and documents – such as the Somerset History volumes and copies of the local commercial directories (and they also have a collection of older posters and handsheets – which Steve Collins was interested in for Stagecoach adverts for example). There are tools for the safe viewing of fragile books and documents that have been ordered out of the stores (pillows, wedges, weights and gloves), map viewing tables, computers for viewing key resources (Ancestry.com, know your area, etc.) Many of these are accessible through their website: <https://swheritage.org.uk/somerset-archives/visit/somerset-heritage-centre/>. This means you can order documents prior to your visit to the centre. You can book your visit on line too. You do need to “join” as a reader for a small fee, and if you want to photograph any items again you need to buy a licence for the day (there are special lighting rigs to get good pictures).

After the talk we were shown to one of the archive stores, where there were a couple of interesting documents on display – their oldest document about Henry VIII, a scroll which illustrated the funeral of Elizabeth I – which was amazing! And some beautiful maps. It was pretty chilly in there! As we wandered about behind the scenes we passed rooms where the conservators were receiving some training, and the walls were lined with interesting old photographs and pictures.

Then we went across to the museum store rooms, and visited the “large items” store – which had old carts and carriages, bits of farm machinery and steam engines pieces, and a large fossil too – all sorts. And then on to an art and fabrics store which was again a treasure trove of samplers, painting, clothing (including one of the stripey woolly jumpers of Time Team archaeologist (deceased) Mick Aston). It took a bit of doing chasing all the members out of these storerooms – we had to count them in and count them out – most of us would have liked to have spent the night there rootling through the trove!

Finally, and rather late, we went back to the reading room to view some documents she had retrieved for us – I had cheekily asked if she could get out some deeds which Pat had tracked down which refer to the mill. They were marvellously fusty looking things, very folded and with lots of dangling seal tags. Esther confessed to not really liking researching deeds – due to their difficult handling and rather dense and mostly dull content. However, she scanned through the first one with us, highlighting the largely formulaic content, which means, with a bit of practice, you can quite quickly pick out the meat from them. We ran out of time for further analysis – though Pat tells me he spotted the word mill on it several times – so we shall soon be back to delve further!

It was agreed that we should organise a group meeting somewhere where we can gather a few laptops together and have a go at exploring the online material together as a group. This would enable the group members to deepen their own research and plan for visits to the Heritage Centre to further their own work – watch this space for a suggestion as to when and how we can do this.

Pat immediately did some follow up work after the meeting and asked me to forward the following:

Following our visit on Monday I've been taking a look at the maps provided on the SWHT website and in particular the tithe map data which I hadn't seen before. Fascinating stuff!

The map can be found at <https://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/#> and then click on Map. Then click on Choose Maps. At the top of that menu tick Tithe Map information and untick the others. At the bottom of that menu select the bottom option Tithe Maps (c.1840).

Go to the place you're interested in and zoom in on the map and little green dots with labels appear on the map for each tithe area (field), you can click on the dot to see more information.

To save a lot of clicking I requested all the tithe data for Kilve and they sent me a spreadsheet which I've uploaded here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1y8kzRqay0UkPMtQd_-C6z-8zSyHNCWGA/edit?usp=sharing&oid=100902397201197103354&rtpof=true&sd=true

They asked me not to share that file beyond the group so please keep it just to us.