

ARCHIVES SERVICE

It was not until after the Second World War that the City of Plymouth had its own archivist to organise, calendar and exploit the collection of manuscripts that it possessed in its Central Library. Mr K L Chinnery took up his post at the beginning of October 1952 and was based at Ham House. He held a honours degree in history as well as a diploma from the School of Archivists in London and was an authority on medieval Anglo-French, Latin and early forms of legal terminology. [1]

He was succeeded by a Mr J M P Farrer, who was in turn followed in February 1958 by Mr Charles Edwin Welsh, formerly a senior assistant at the West Sussex Record Office. He was educated at the University of Leicester and obtained his Masters degree at the University of Liverpool. [2]

Mr Welch ensured that the City's records were properly catalogued and was responsible for writing the first two books in an intended, but unfinished, series on the subject of the archives. A lot of extra work was created for him when the various departments of the City commenced moving into the Civic Centre and deposited with him new records that in some cases went back to 1812. Whether this was instrumental in his departure at the end of May 1962 for a new appointment at Southampton is not known. [3]

On April 1st 1974 Plymouth City Council was paced under the control of Devon County Council and the Archives Department of Plymouth City Council became the West Devon Record Office. During the last week of May 1975 the archives were moved into new accommodation in the basement of the Central Library, officially known as number 14 Tavistock Place. Now properly known as a Record Office, it was the legal point of deposit for public records, manorial records and parish records and provided facilities for private

institutions to permanently preserve their documents. The new West Devon Record Office was opened to the public at 9am on Monday June 2nd 1975. [4]

Any joy at this development was short-lived. Mr A A H Knightbridge, a public records inspector, carried out an inspection and in a report to the Council in December 1980 declared that the cramped and overcrowded storage premises were '*the worst he has ever seen*'. The working space for staff was bad and the humidity in the basement and the damp at an auxiliary storage place at Crownhill (Holy Trinity Chapel ?) meant that the preservation of the documents could be at risk. The classic set of shipping registers for the Port were in fact being stored at Exeter. Plymouth, said Mrs Margery Rowe, the head of the Devon Record Service, had only 900 square feet of storage facilities compared to 10,000 square feet in Exeter. The search room at Crownhill was supposed to accommodate 300 searchers per year but 2,500 visited it during 1979 and many had to be turned away. [5]

Councillor George Creber, chairman of the West Devon Policy Committee, commented that: '*The staff are in incredibly efficient but I have never seen such cramped conditions, with everything packed in. They don't conform to the Safety Act, or anything else for that matter*'. Councillor W Ivor Thompson said that it was '*deplorable that Plymouth, a City of such long and famous maritime associations, is unable to provide a permanent home for its own shipping records*'. [5]

One of the options available to Devon County Council was to spend £143,000 on a new building [5] but instead they chose to convert a modern industrial warehouse in Clare Place, Coxside, at a cost of just £26,000. This provided a large storage room, a search room and a room for meetings and lectures. Still known as the West Devon Record Office, a small charge of £1 per person, or £10 a year, was made for admission. Miss

Elizabeth Stuart was the area archivist. It opened to the public on Monday March 1st 1982 while the chairman of Devon County Council, Mr George Creber, performed the official opening ceremony on Thursday June 10th 1982 in the presence of the Lord Mayor of Plymouth, Mr Reg Scott. [6]

As users of what is now the Plymouth & West Devon Record Office will know, history is currently repeating itself.

Sources:

[1] "Plymouth Appoints its Own Archivist: Headquarters to be at Ham House", *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, September 10th 1952.

[2] "New Archivist for Plymouth", *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, January 16th 1958.

[3] "City Archivist is Leaving for Southampton Job", *Western Evening Herald*, Plymouth, May 12th 1962.

[4] "New archives office opens in Plymouth", *Western Evening Herald*, Plymouth, May 30th 1975.

[5] "Records Store 'The Worst he has Ever Seen'", *Western Evening Herald*, Plymouth, December 10th 1980.

[6] "Just for the (pubic) record", *Western Morning News*, Plymouth, June 11th 1982.

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