

BLAKE NEWS

Autumn 2021

From Stewart Richards Chairman of the Friends of Blake Museum

Dear Friends

As I write this, I reflect on the last 18 months and the havoc that has been created in that period by the pandemic. I hope that you all have personally overcome the lockdowns, the changing social distancing rules and the need to get vaccinated to some degree and life has been different but survivable. I think that we are now seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, which will signify that although the virus is not beaten it will become controllable.

Due to people's concerns for their well-being, there will not be an AGM in 2021. Your committee will be having its first formal meeting sometime in October, where we will discuss how we go forward. The details of the meeting will be made available to you all shortly after it takes place.

Not all has been in a state of dormancy for the Friends and for your committee and volunteers, here are some of the things that have happened in the shutdown and since the museum has been open.

The volunteer gardeners continued nurturing the garden during the spring and summer ensuring new borders were watered and weeds kept at bay. The Friends have funded a variety of plants including 5 highly fragrant roses one being a rambler, a few penstemons, delphiniums, geraniums and bedding begonias. I think you will agree from the picture that the result has been splendid, and we have had many favourable comments from visitors.



Several volunteers supported the Friends in selling refreshments for the Quayside festival in July and we were able to realise in excess of £110 on a day when the weather was not too special in the morning. All the volunteers were so happy to be back with fellow Friends and said how enjoyable it was to be back serving the public and increasing funds for the benefit of the museum. Thanks to those volunteers who helped with providing the refreshments service on the day.

Mike Searle created a walk-through exhibition for the day which was related to Carol Lee Scott the famous witch 'Grotbags' and this was very well attended. It was originally going to be just for the day of the Quayside Festival however, due to its success Mike decided to continue the exhibition during the school holidays. Considering that the museum has only been open 3 days a week it certainly has been a draw with more than 150 adults and 20 children visiting the museum in August. I would suspect that many of the adults would have been children when 'Grotbags' was at her most famous. See overleaf for



some pictures.

In addition to the Grotbag's exhibition Carol's family donated several personal items from her home that the family said should be sold to raise funds and this has been undertaken by the Friends. Added to this the family also made a significant financial donation. Thanks also to the volunteers who helped with marshalling the exhibition and selling items of memorabilia.

The Friends have now joined the contactless card payment world and are now able to accept electronic payments for items in the shop, refreshments and donations. This I am sure will help sales as many people no longer carry cash in any quantity.

The Friends have played a big part in ensuring that the museum has been able to open with the correct number of custodians and a key holder for the 3 days of the week that it is open. This from the initial social distancing requirements to the current situation. Thanks to all those volunteers who have enabled the museum to open and to those who make the arrangements for covering the opening hours.

The mill project has been pretty much dormant during the pandemic and the project will be discussed with the Town Clerk sometime in September. The one thing that has happened is that the council have agreed to release funds from the mill restoration fund for an independent feasibility study to be carried out for the project. The feasibility study will look at what is trying to be achieved and assess its viability. This is very important as it is often a prerequisite for seeking funding from many funds such as National Lottery Heritage Fund. I will be discussing with the Town Clerk possible organisations who can provide the necessary feasibility study in September.

Finally, a few of our volunteers will not be returning after such a long absence due to the pandemic. Therefore, we do need new active volunteers, so if you do know of people who would be willing to give a few hours a week to assist with custodial duties please put their names forward.

Let's look forward to a more positive conclusion to the end of the year and a re-energised 2022. Please accept my thanks for your understanding during the difficult times we have all had to endure.

From the Curator

Dear all, I hope you are all keeping well.

If you are not aware, the museum is now open as normal, there is no requirement to make an appointment for viewing, just come on down and you will be made welcome. The museum is currently only open on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday of each week. This will be until the end of October when we will be reverting to winter opening times. Times and dates will be posted on the museum website in due course. From April 2022 it is hoped that we can include Wednesdays in the normal opening period

The 'Grotbags' costume and other items will be moved to a permanent display upstairs. This will be in a bespoke case, once it has been fitted with suitable lighting.

The Unitarian Chapel in Dampiet Street will be holding a Jumble Sale at the museum in early November, the date is to be announced. This is to help raise funds for urgent works needed to the organ which is full of woodworm, and repairs to the roof and other internal work. The Chapel is currently out of use.

If you know anyone who has recently retired or about to retire and is interested in history and would like to become a volunteer at the museum, please put them in contact with Rob Gardner, the museum's Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Mike Searle
Hon Curator



News of Members

Brian Withers is recovering well from his heart surgery.

Jane Woolrich is in hospital recovering from a bad fall at home at the end of August.

Lesley Withers, Hon Treasurer, writes:

I've just finished the accounts and we've made a profit of just over £4000, which is mainly due to 2 years gift aid refund. The new card reader is proving useful not only in the shop but for donations too.

Bridgwater Town Council History Day

This will be on 20th November at the Arts Centre. As last year it will be a mix of talks and videos. Please consult the Town Council's website later for full details.

Bridgwater Heritage Group

Dr Miles Kerr Peterson & Tony Woolrich

Major projects this summer have been to research the origins of

Bridgwater's street names, and investigate the Bridgwater Poor Law in the early C19. We were invited to contribute essays about these to the Summer 2021 issue of the *Newsletter* of the Victoria County History of Somerset.

The street names project was done at the request of the Town Council, following the row about the naming of Northgate Yard. The Poor Law work started with adding to the web sites the texts of a series pamphlets by John Bowen, who opposed the new Poor Law. He was a local wine merchant and editor of the *Alfred* newspaper, and publicised the dire workhouse conditions where $\frac{1}{3}$ of the inmates died of severe dysentery due to the neglect of the Guardians.

His writings sparked a House of Lords Committee of enquiry, when 43 folk gave evidence over 19 days and the printed evidence ran to 800 pages, containing extraordinary testimony about living conditions in Bridgwater then.

An ongoing project has been an architectural history of Saint Mary's church, leading up to the recent re-ordering. Completed pages describe the organ and the stained-glass windows. Other articles have included one contributed by a reader about the King Square war memorial.

Another project has been to update with more pictures and text the article about the Telescopic Bridge which linked the Docks area with the main railway line.

The group has obtained and digitised a microfilm of Bowen's *Alfred*, August 1831 to December 1832. Weekly numbers are being posted on the website regularly.

Published by the Friends of Blake Museum

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Registered Charity No 1099815

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TW 13/09/21

Websites:

Friends: www.blakemuseumfriends.org.uk

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Bridgwater Heritage group: www.bridgwaterheritagegroup.org.uk