

THE MUSEUM

1995 was a memorable year for the County Museum, culminating in the reopening of its Church Street premises on 25 October after more than six years of closure and three years of renovation work. The opening, performed by the Lord Lieutenant of Buckinghamshire, Lord Cottesloe KStJ, JP, Royal Navy (retired), was attended by over 250 invited guests. In total the project had cost over £3 million, of which more than £500,000 was raised from public donation to the Art Gallery Appeal.

The newly-refurbished museum has gained praise both for its building and its displays. Internally the building is almost unrecognisable, with a fine new entrance foyer with shop and cafe leading from the Coach House yard, and a superb new infill building housing a museum gallery at ground floor level and art gallery on the first floor. The basement has been extended and the Society's muniments room rebuilt. Structurally the building is now in fine condition, having been restored, strengthened and adapted to provide excellent accommodation for its purpose as a museum. Great attention has been paid to the provision of facilities for disabled people, including lifts, ramps, toilets and other provision for the partially sighted and hearing impaired. By retaining the County Museum Technical Centre at Halton for the storage of collections almost all of the Church Street premises can now be made available for public use, effectively more than doubling the size of the Museum.

Displays in the main museum gallery, costing over £260,000, focus on eight Buckinghamshire themes. They deliberately do not set out to tell the entire history of the county, but give a flavour of its life. It is planned that these themes will change as time goes on, ensuring that the Museum does not stagnate in the eyes of visitors. Each theme draws upon a variety of material from all parts of the collection, making the displays particularly suitable for non-specialists and children. Temporary

exhibitions in the new special exhibitions gallery provide opportunities for more in-depth explorations of the Museum's collection.

Shortage of funds prevented all the Museum's galleries being completed as planned. Further galleries will open as funding permits, including an interpretive gallery on the history of the Museum's building and a textiles gallery to exhibit its important costume collection.

The new Buckinghamshire Art Gallery, housing changing exhibitions that are either hired in or which draw on the Museum's collections, provides a regional attraction for visitors. The first exhibition in the Gallery, 'We Three Kings - The Magi in Art and Legend', was assembled by Sir Timothy Raison, who also led the Appeal that raised £500,000 to build the Gallery. The exhibition included important material from major museums and galleries and collections throughout Great Britain, including the Queen's Collection, the National Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Museum and the British Library. It was critically acclaimed by all the major national newspapers and was visited by over 7,000 people.

Another major addition to the County Museum will be the Roald Dahl Children's Gallery, the County Museum's 'hands-on' children's museum. Building work is already underway on an extension to the Coach House to provide stairs and a lift for the Gallery. Further funds are being sought to allow it to open on target in 1996.

At the County Museum Technical Centre considerable strides have been made relating to documentation and access for collections. In particular work was completed on the computerisation of the County Museum's photographic archive and Prints, Watercolours and Drawings collection, with all items now copied as digital images and accessible on computer screen. The art collection images are already accessible on a touch-screen

computer in the Art Gallery. This work is being extended to the County Library's photographic archive, with the aim of making all the collections available in libraries throughout the county.

Acquisitions to collections during 1995 included a Roman Hoard of six vessels from Fleet Marston, a Medieval Ampulla from Olney and a

13th century lead seal matrix from Aston Clinton. The Buckinghamshire branch of the National Art Collections Fund marked the opening of the Art Gallery by giving three important ceramic works to the British Studio Ceramics collection.

Colin V. Dawes
County Museums Officer

COUNTY RECORD OFFICE

Extracts from the Annual Report of the County Archivist for 1995

The year was dominated by the impending re-organisation of local government in 1997, when a new Milton Keynes unitary authority will come into being. Planning is well advanced for 're-positioning' a much smaller (and poorer) County Council. Discussions of the county-wide role of the Record Office have accepted the need to avoid splitting up the collections.

Accessions in 1995 totalled 143, compared with 158 in 1994.

A large quantity of long-forgotten county surveyor's plans relating to roads and bridges came to light in the Judges Lodgings. Other official records received included 20th-century rate books of High Wycombe and Marlow, and hospital records from both places.

There was a further substantial deposit of records for the parish of Buckingham, including records of the rebuilding of the parish church in the 1770s and a large quantity of poor law settlement papers. Further deposits were received from 17 other parishes and four nonconformist congregations.

Some papers of Sir Arthur Bryant, the historian, were received, showing him in the unfamiliar role of dairy farmer at Mentmore, where he kept a herd of pedigree Jersey cattle.

The diary of a World War I soldier who served in the Oxon and Bucks Light Infantry at Ypres and Vimy Ridge in 1917, and later in Italy, was acquired by purchase. He gives lively impressions of life in billets and in the trenches. A bundle of deeds of Berry Hill House, Taplow, dating from 1800, provide the identity of the "house at Taplow" extended for Lady Williams Wynn by Sir John Soane, and shown on a plan dated 1792 at the Soane Museum, London. It has since been demolished.

The masters of the fraternity of the Virgin Mary of Aylesbury, and the churchwardens, were parties to a deed of 1530, acquired by purchase. The other party was Sir John Baldwin, who in return for a waiver of rights of common on some of his land undertook to provide lead for re-roofing the parish church. Baldwin was one of the judges at the trial of Queen Anne Boleyn in 1536. The fraternity was dissolved in 1547, but its 'brother house' survives within the fabric of part of the County Museum.

The purchase of a series of court rolls of the manor of Great Marlow from 1540 to the mid eighteenth century was achieved with the help of a grant from the Victoria and Albert Museum's Purchase Grant Fund. Also purchased at auction was the minute and account book of the commissioners for the inclosure of Maids Moreton, with Gawcott and Prebend End.

Most of the smaller current accessions were dealt with in the course of the year, and progress was made in listing several of the larger recent deposits. Relisting of the very large collection of manorial records received from the Bucks Archaeological Society was finally completed. Work was also begun on revising the existing funding aids for the Ashridge (Egerton) and Earl Howe estate papers. Other useful inroads were made into the backlog.

Personal visits to the office totalled 3079 (2693 in 1994). 7228 document slips were presented (7904 in 1994). For the first time the office is able to supply copies of documents on microfilm by post.

A customer survey showed that the majority of users came from outside the county, including 10% from abroad; 67% were family historians; local and house history accounted for 24% of users.