

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Archiving Salisbury Cathedral

by Emily Naish, 5 March 2019

The Magna Carta is undoubtedly the most famous of Salisbury Cathedral's treasures, but as Emily Naish, Cathedral Archivist, explained, it is by no means the only rare manuscript in the Cathedral's collection. The archive holds documents compiled in the former cathedral at Old Sarum, and one manuscript which may have come from the nuns of Wilton Abbey. There are minutes of Chapter meetings dating back to 1329, and Christopher Wren's report of 1668 on the state of the Cathedral. Wren noted that the spire was leaning badly, and advocated iron bands to strengthen the structure.



It is not enough to hold a collection of rare books and manuscripts; they need to be preserved and they need to be accessible. Modern storage facilities in the Close are temperature and humidity controlled, but there are challenges in the library itself, which dates from the mid-15th century. The environment is monitored, not only for humidity but also for pests. The Cathedral library and archive has a policy of making its collections accessible, by holding a programme of open days and talks, and by encouraging use by other departments of the Cathedral.

An important tool for accessing the collection by researchers is an accurate and up-to-date catalogue. Emily and volunteers are re-cataloguing the archive collection, while the library collection is being catalogued as part of the Heritage Lottery-funded Beyond the Library Door project. New items continue to be added to the collections, including oral history interviews. The collection includes a feather, donated by an RSPB employee interviewed about the peregrine falcons nesting at the Cathedral.

Emily concluded her talk with an account of how the Cathedral's treasures, including books and manuscripts, were removed for safety during the Second World War. On 6 September 1939, only three days after the outbreak of war, a Chapter meeting was informed that the Magna Carta and other documents had been removed from the monuments room over the vestry and deposited in the Chapter Clerk's strong room (now the present archives storage facility). But this was too close to the Cathedral to be truly secure. A national hunt for safe storage for church and cathedral artefacts had located suitable facilities in the catacombs below the church of St Andrew's in the Somerset village of Wiveliscombe. By January 1941 Salisbury had sent 20 boxes of books, manuscripts and other objects to Wiveliscombe, where they remained for the duration of the war alongside artefacts from Exeter and elsewhere. The Magna Carta with two chests of books and documents remained at Salisbury until 1942, when they were transferred to Westwood Quarry at Bradford on Avon, a large storage facility used by many museums to store their collections. In the event, Salisbury Cathedral survived the war unscathed, and its collections were returned after the war.

Our next talk will be by Ruth Butler on 'Albany Ward: Cinema Pioneer of the South West' at 7.30pm on Tuesday 2 April at Morgan's Vale & Woodfalls Village Hall.