

# The *Museletter*

Winter 2024



## Looking back – and forward

**W**elcome to the Winter 2024 issue of The Museletter. The year seems to have flown by. Since January, our wonderful museum stewards have welcomed almost 5,000 visitors. The museum is now closed while our Hon. Curator, Roger Clark, carries out the annual deep clean, retouches paintwork, and makes whatever changes and additions to exhibits that he can manage – no mean feat as the museum is already full to the rafters. We reopen on Wednesday 15 January 2025.

Back in September, our annual fundraising lecture was a huge success. Renowned architectural historian and Bradford on Avon Museum trustee, Julian Orbach, gave a fascinating lecture on 'Bradford, a town made all of stone' which was really well attended, and it was lovely to see so many of you there.

We've had some really interesting Discussion Group sessions this year as well – thanks to Roy Canham for organising those – including a very timely talk given by Danny O'Callaghan in November on the History of Bradford Floods. Our thoughts are with all of the homes and businesses affected by the recent flooding in the town centre.

In the last Museletter, I mentioned that we had received a grant from Museum Development South West to undertake some work on audience development and income generation. Since then, we have appointed CultureForce to work with us on this project. The income generation part kicks off in December, but we have already started work on audience development.

During November, we conducted 55 visitor surveys to help us understand our

current audience and their likes, dislikes, wants and needs.

We have also surveyed our own stewards to get their insights on the visitor experience. And in order to better understand how the museum sits in the local community, Tamsin from CultureForce has been out and about in the town surveying the general public. Tamsin is now taking all of these findings in order to put together a plan for the future.

And finally, if you are still looking for a last-minute Christmas gift, our museum publications make great presents – you can find a full list on page 3! I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas and New Year, and I look forward to seeing you in 2025.

*Kate Turnbull, Chair*

## Water, water everywhere ...

As a geographer and local flood warden, Danny O'Callaghan is well qualified to talk about flooding in Bradford on Avon, the history of which he has researched in depth.

Our River Avon measures 83 miles from its source in Gloucestershire to the point where it meets the Bristol Channel at Avonmouth, but only 19 miles as the crow flies, having flowed east, south and west. This is owing to the local geology, which also affects fluctuating river levels after rainfall, as does the water table within the limestone hill on which Bradford sits.

At November's Discussion Group, Danny spoke about some of the major – and dramatic – incidents in the town's long history of floods:

**1852:** Newspaper reports of flood in the town with factories inundated;

**1867:** The Avon 'suddenly rose' and became a 'roaring torrent'. Greenland Mills was wrecked and objects washed away were rescued further downstream;

**1875:** Summer storms – the 1870s a very wet decade;



■ Dog paddling – Christmas Eve 2013

**1877:** From Malmesbury to Bristol the Avon rose 12 feet above normal level;

**1879:** A very cold spell allowed ice skating on the river;

**1882:** Holy Trinity Church flooded when the Avon rose 17 feet above normal – marked by a plaque in Westbury Gardens. All mills shut down and workers went unpaid;

**1894:** Bradford Flood Relief Fund awarded compensation to townsfolk who suffered damage;

**1894:** Big Freeze;

**1903:** Heavy rainfall and floods photographed;

**1925:** 'The Great Flood';

**1933:** A new flood policy led to the felling of 500 trees between Chippenham and Bradford to remove silt from the river bed – which only led to faster flow and greater risk of flooding;

**1961:** Government funds awarded to provide flood defences, although Bradford received little;

**1963 and 1979:** More major floods;

**1980s and 1990s:** fairly quiet decades for flooding;

**2000s:** Bradford flooded again on several occasions;

**2017:** Barrier erected at the Bullpit but was found to be ineffective and later abandoned, given that water rises from below in addition to flowing from the river course. It was also found to be a health and safety risk when the river was able to force back the barrier.

*Roger Jones*

\* \* \* We wish all our members a very merry Christmas and a peaceful New Year \* \* \*

# The cloth industry: the burlers and the slaymakers

The production of cloth was a complex business involving many processes and specialist workers. Many of these minor trades, such as the burlers and slaymakers, tend to be overlooked. The Bradford probate inventories for the early 18th century include those of three burlers and a slaymaker.

Burling was the working over the surface of the cloth using a large pair of tweezers called a burling iron to remove any knots or other extraneous matter. Usually this was done by women, suggesting that the three Bradford burlers were really employers with their own workshops. Henry Burges (d.1719) is a good example. He seems to have been quite well off with his kitchen having some of the new Dutch pottery including 30 plates and dishes. He had a separate burling shop which contained, as well as some furniture, two burling boards, and six burling irons.

Somewhat similar was William Spender the elder (d.1717). When he died he left a house in Bradford which was divided



■ A burling iron – just under life-size: these tweezers are about four inches long

into two tenements, one of which he occupied. This was said to have a burling house adjoining. Less successful was Christopher Stratton (d.1712). He had a lot of personal possessions and a house at Stoke. But he had a large number of debts amounting to over £40, which was some £20 more than his total assets.

Lower down the pecking order were the slaymakers. A slay was a wooden instrument used in weaving to beat up the weft. The one Bradford example was Richard Baylie (d. 1709), whose total possessions were valued at £42. Much of this was in his stock of slays, many of them old and decayed, worth £16.

A brief comparison can be made between these lesser trades and the

clothworkers who did the finishing processes and, after the clothiers, stood at the top of the industry. Robert Smith (d.1720) had assets worth £113. The contents of his shearing shop suggest he employed a number of workers. This contained some 13 pairs of shears (worth £8), 81 courses of clothworkers' handles (also worth £8), two packs of teasels and a clothworker's press.

These examples show how wills and probate inventories can shed some interesting light on the industry which dominated Bradford for several centuries.

● For more information see Ken Rogers' *Woollen Industry Processes* (published by Trowbridge Museum in 2018)

Ivor Slocombe

## Thank you, stewards

As another year draws to a close, trustees want to say a huge 'thank you' to our loyal stewards who turn out with customary good cheer to open the museum and welcome visitors from near and far. We wouldn't have a museum without you!

I would like to give special thanks to our fantastic steward co-ordinators, Ethel Johnson and Gordon Phillips, who spend hours monitoring the rota before firing off pleading emails the moment they spot a vacant slot. As a result of their tireless work we were open for a staggering 680 hours during this year. We clocked up 4,275 known visits, and the total number of hours contributed by volunteers was 8,113.

The third person I would like to thank is Peter Mann. You will all know Peter because he's our gatekeeper - the person who demystifies the whole stewarding process through his thorough training and gives you the confidence to turn up and do your slot. Without his speedy throughput in training new volunteers during 2023 and 2024 we could well have struggled to open for all of our advertised hours.

All in all, 2024 has been a good year for the museum, with improving visitor numbers, positive visitor comments, and an expanding list of museum publications, now standing at 24, an astonishing number for a small museum like ours.

To show their gratitude for all you have done and continue to do for the museum, trustees will organise an annual stewards' party early in 2025. Expect a fantastic choice of food, drinks and a quiz to challenge the grey cells. We look forward to seeing you there.

Valerie Holden

## From Bradford to Ottawa



The neo-Jacobean town hall in Bradford on Avon and the grandest Gothic Revival public building in the Americas, the Canadian Parliament Buildings at Ottawa, were both designed within five years of each other by the Bath-born architect, Thomas Fuller (1823-98). The town hall (1854), is his most important building designed before he emigrated to Toronto in 1857.

Fuller's career was the subject of the September discussion group, led by Julian Orbach. The son of a Bath carriage-maker, Fuller was articled aged 15 in 1838 to the rising Bath architect James Wilson. He left Wilson's practice in 1854, perhaps when he gained the job of building the new Town Hall at Bradford. In 1855 he won a competition that allowed him to design the two chapels at the town's new cemetery on the Holt road.

Two years later, he and his family emigrated to Canada, where his distinguished career really took off, with designs for numerous public buildings in North America, including the Canadian parliament buildings.



# 'A town made all of stone'

Museum trustee Julian Orbach delivered this year's sell-out annual lecture - and kept the audience enthralled

The title of Julian Orbach's lecture is a quote from John Leland who, in around 1540, toured the kingdom and made notes on what he observed.

In Bradford, 'a town made all of stone', he noted the presence of quarries and mines which yielded a variety of stone - from rubble to fine ashlar. The finer material was reserved for the façade and rubble for the less noticeable side and back elevations of the more prestigious buildings. Rubble stone was generally used for humbler cottages.

Ashlar is employed on the façade of The Hall. This impressive house, dating from the end of the Elizabethan age, is in a style sometimes referred to as 'more glass than wall' and displays similar features to those at Longleat and Montacute.

Like some other buildings, Timbrell's Yard was whitewashed to improve its overall appearance.

Newtown, constructed in 1697, is built of square stone, though not the best - unlike the nearby Zion Chapel of 1698 which boasts the finest stone, thus emphasising the importance of the local Baptists. Abbey House, from 1725-30, has a fine stone façade, while rubble is used for its side elevations.

Local stone varied in quality: sometimes ashlar blocks maintain their integrity, although sometimes they weathered along bedding planes, as can be observed in some of the houses at the top end of Tory. As time progressed, local stone improved in quality and grew less expensive. Nevertheless it was generally easier and cheaper to patch up a crumbling stone wall than to rebuild. Stonemasons were builders - architecture was a profession of the future.

The Saxon Church, *pictured right*, more than 1,000 years old, presents many puzzles for the architectural historian in its odd construction and detailing. Holy Trinity is a very large Norman church dating from around 1200. It was much modified in the Victorian age, although its tower survives in its original state.

Thomas Horton, a wealthy local clothier, built the unusually large Church House, now Wallington Hall, together with the north aisle in Holy Trinity. The Priory, at the corner of Newtown, was built by the Methuens, also clothiers; it is a 16th century building which was mostly demolished in 1938, although the Priory Barn remains.

The period 1690 to 1740 might be described as 'rustic baroque'. There

was an emphasis on vertical windows - which presaged the sash windows to come - and framing surrounding doors and windows known as bolection moulding. At this period there was much overlapping of architectural styles and detailing, including the Classical. Pediments began to appear; examples may be seen at Westbury House and Druce's Hill House.

The Georgian influence of nearby Bath made itself felt in Bradford: Belcombe House was designed by John Wood. Lynchetts in Silver Street has triple windows to maximise the admittance of light.

More recently, Wharf House, adjacent to the canal at the Frome Road locks, is a perfect small Regency house, while Abbey Mill in Church Street is an impressive Gothic-style industrial building. Bradford on Avon Town Hall is in Jacobean style, and the Post Office on the corner of The Shambles and Market Street, dating from 1936, is an example of Arts and Crafts-inspired architecture.

Concluding his helter skelter ride through the many uses and styles of building in which local stone is the essential ingredient, Julian finished his illustrated lecture with an amusing account of the sculpted heads of many classical gods and their symbolism which adorn the façade of the former wine merchants in Silver Street.

Throughout a presentation lasting for over an hour, our speaker entranced his audience and left them with a determination to look harder at the extraordinary richness of Bradford on Avon's built environment.

Roger Jones



## Books, books, books

As a small independent museum we are fortunate in our publications output, producing books on almost every aspect of Bradford on Avon's history, written and researched by expert authors.

As Christmas approaches you might like to consider giving one or more of our books to friends and family - there's something for every age and interest!

In 2024 we published three new titles: *Improving Life in 19th century Bradford on Avon* by Ivor Slocombe, *Belcombe Court* by Matthew Slocombe, and *Testaments in Stone, Non-Conformist Chapels in Bradford on Avon* by James Holden.

Here is a full list of all the books we publish:

*Abbey Mill* (£3); *Anglo Saxon Bradford on Avon* (£3); *Barton Farm, the last 1,000 years* (£4); *Belcombe Court* (£7.50); *Bradford Leigh Fair* (£4); *Bradford on Avon 1500 - 1700* (£7.50); *Bradford on Avon, the 1841 Map* (£5); *Bradford on Avon Probate Inventories, 1550-1700* (£6); *Bridges of Bradford on Avon* (£3); *Budbury, from Hillfort to Housing* (£8.50); *Buildings of Barton Farm* (£4.75); *The Christopher Pharmacy* (£2.50); *The Domestic Woollen Industry* (£3); *Geology and Landscapes of Bradford on Avon* (£3); *The Hall, Bradford on Avon* (£7.50); *Improving Life in 19th century Bradford on Avon* (£5); *The Medieval Town* (£3); *The Millennium Embroidery* (£3); *A History of Rowley-Wittenham: Deserted Medieval Village and Lost Parish* (£8); *Rubber Town* (£10); *Testaments in Stone - The Nonconformist Chapels of Bradford on Avon* (£7.50); *The Saxon Church* (£4); *A Vanished World* (£10); *Whooosh - An historical adventure in Bradford on Avon* (£5)

We also sell some non - museum books written by local authors: *Brylcreem & Broken Biscuits* by Stephanie Laslett, *Bradford on Avon, a town like no other* by Roger Jones and *Names In Stone* by Jonathan Falconer.

All the books listed above can be bought from the museum, (during opening hours) or from Ex Libris bookshop in The Shambles.

### Museum Trustees:

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# Hidden history – two houses on St Margaret's Street



**T**hese two adjacent houses on St Margaret's Street tell us about the rise of the Shrapnel family.

To the right is number 6/7, with its three gables and mullioned windows harking back to Tudor times if not earlier. In fact it was built in the late 17th century for Henry Shrapnel, a member of a family of coopers. He was an early supporter of the Baptists and is believed to have held Baptist meetings here as early as 1672.

To the left is number 5, now a dental practice. Of c1720, so perhaps barely 50 years younger than its neighbour, it is from a different architectural world

with its symmetrical classical façade, smooth ashlar stone, sash windows and central pediment. This was built by Zachariah Shrapnel, son of Henry. Zachariah was now a wealthy clothier and the new house shows off the family's rising status.

It was he who gave the Baptists the site for their first chapel at a nominal rent. But it seems that, despite this generous act, the family's adherence to nonconformist religion did not last much longer and they were soon back with the Church of England: a family memorial is in Holy Trinity.

The Shrapnel family remained

prominent here for many years but their most famous, or perhaps infamous, member was General Henry Shrapnel (1761-1842), inventor of the Shrapnel exploding shell.

You can read more about nonconformist chapels in Bradford in our new publication, *Testaments in Stone - The Nonconformist Chapels of Bradford on Avon*. This, and our many other titles, are available from the museum itself or from Ex Libris bookshop in The Shambles, and details of them all are available on our website.

James Holden

## Subscriptions are due!

It's that time of year again when membership subscriptions are due for everyone who does not pay by standing order. If you are not sure whether you are up to date with your subscription, please contact Chris Dale.

If you do not already pay by standing order, please consider doing so, as it saves us a lot of work in checking and chasing payments.

If you are a tax payer, please consider filling out a Gift Aid form. This increases the value of your support to the Museum by 25 per cent! As a registered charity, the Museum Society is eligible to reclaim from HMRC the equivalent of tax you have paid on your subscriptions and donations.

You can download both forms from the Museum website at [www.bradfordonavonmuseum.co.uk/membership](http://www.bradfordonavonmuseum.co.uk/membership). Just click the 'PDF Membership Mandate Form' link for the standing order form, and the 'Gift Aid form' link for Gift Aid.

Alternatively, contact Chris Dale (862198) or Kate Turnbull (866328) for paper copies of these forms.

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