

Archives for everyone: transforming traditional archives in a digital world

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In 2012 Worcestershire County Council's Record Office and Historic Environment and Archaeology Service were combined into a single 'Archive and Archaeology Service' (WAAS). At the same time WAAS moved into The Hive, a new public space in the heart of the city, also containing the public library and the University of Worcester library. It was the first building in Europe to include a combined public and university library, providing many diverse resources under one roof. The Hive provides access not only to physical resources, but also to a range of digital resources that would otherwise be inaccessible or chargeable; for example, the public can gain free access to online journals and publications normally behind university firewalls, as well as websites such as Ancestry and Find My Past.

As a combined service, WAAS has had the opportunity to engage with new audiences and provide better services to existing customers. One area being developed is the linking up of Historic Environment Records (HERs) and archival records so that customers, and partners such as Conservation Officers, can find information more easily. This, combined with another aim to create better access to the archives through digitisation and online dissemination, led to the creation of the Charles Archive

project. In 2018 Historic England funded a partnership project between WAAS and Worcester City HER to fully catalogue the Charles Archive, held by WAAS, and then digitise a selection of images from what was considered to be the most important and informative material.

The Charles architectural practice archive was deposited with Worcestershire Record Office (now WAAS) in 2002. Freddie Charles (1912–2002) was an architect and nationally recognised expert on the conservation and repair of timber-framed buildings. With his wife, architect Mary Charles (née Logan, 1924–2005), he set up an architect's practice that eventually specialised in historic timber-framed buildings. Throughout their careers Freddie and Mary were involved in the restoration of many important timber-framed buildings including the Ancient High House in Stafford, The Old White Hart Inn, Newark (Notts) and over 250 buildings in Worcestershire, many of them of national importance. Their publications included the seminal *Conservation of Timber Buildings*, first published in 1984, *Medieval cruck-building and its derivatives: A study of timber-framed construction based on buildings in Worcestershire* (Society for Medieval Archaeology Monographs no.2, 1967) and *The Great Barn of Bredon: Its Fire and Reconstruction* (Oxbow Monographs 1997). In terms of the practice's wider influence, it was a training ground for many of the next generation of architects working on the conservation of timber buildings. The practice also completed the accelerated resurvey of listed buildings in Hereford & Worcester in the mid-1980s for English Heritage.

The Charles Archive is representative of many collections held by record offices and archives nationally, containing important information about historic buildings that would provide enormous benefit if easily accessible. Now is an opportune moment to explore the integration of historic building conservation archives into HERs; to link up information held in archive catalogues with HER databases; and to understand how best to integrate historic building conservation records into online repositories in order to preserve them and make them accessible now and in the future. Issues of digital preservation, virtual storage, online access and future management of these archives also need to be understood and addressed as more archives are created or born digital.

Just over 1000 images from the Charles Archive have been photographed and information from the catalogue added to each of the building records within the HER for both Worcester City and Worcestershire. The information has enhanced each record to give details such as building layout, build date, and conservation and restorative repair work. Around two thirds of the buildings are listed and details of previous work will be invaluable in determining future repair and restoration. Low-resolution images are linked to the HER records and the archive-quality, digitised archive is available online via the Archaeology Data Service (ADS) in York.

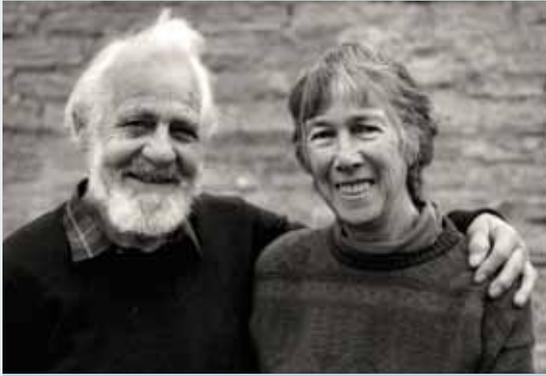
More information about the project can be found at www.explorepast.co.uk/project/Charles-Archive.



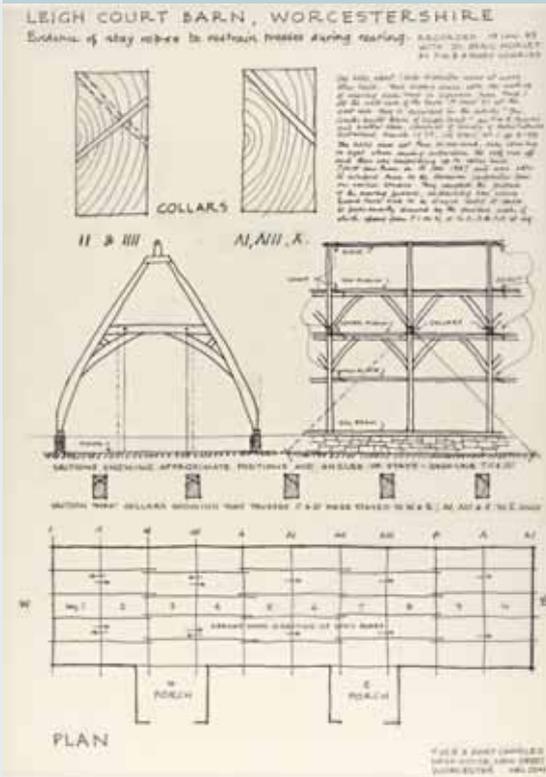
The Hive, Worcester. Credit: Worcestershire County Council

Photograph of F.W.B. 'Freddie' and Mary Charles taken by Malcolm S. Kirk, captioned 'with warmest memories of my stay with you at Churchill Mill'.

Credit: Kindly provided by Nickie Charles



Leigh Court Barn, South Worcestershire. Recorded and restored in the late 1980s–early 1990s. Credit: the Charles Archive



Decorated timbers in the roof at Astwood Court Redditch. Representative of the many photographs of architectural gems held in the collection. Credit: the Charles Archive

Sheena Payne-Lunn

Sheena has managed the Worcester City Historic Environment Record since 2003 and has worked closely with conservation officers in the department on projects to enhance the record of the historic built environment.



Emily Hathaway

Emily is the Historic Landscape Officer at Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service and has particular skills in landscape assessment and management of the rural historic built environment, having worked on several Historic England funded projects to understand and research the county's built heritage.



Adrian Gregson

Adrian comes from Lancashire but has worked for Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service since 1987 and is now Archive Collections Manager. His published work has been on the First World War but he is currently interested in the 18th century.



Tegan Cornah

Tegan is a Historic Environment Record Assistant at Worcestershire Archive and Archaeology Service. After working as a field archaeologist on numerous multi-period sites throughout the West Midlands and Scotland, she made the move into the HER and has contributed to enhancing the historic data held within the county from the Defence of Britain Project to wetlands and the Charles Archive. She also takes an interest in the planning and legislation of the historic environment.

