

Friends of Historic Essex

ERO Manager report to AGM, July 2020

Temporary closure of ERO building due to COVID-19: As you will know, the ERO building has been closed since the last week in March. A skeleton staff have been visiting the building to monitor the conditions and maintain the preservation of the collections. A number of staff have been furloughed but most have been working from home where possible.

As I write this, the date when the ERO will reopen to the public remains uncertain. However, work is under way to make adjustments to the building and procedures in order to enable social distancing and to minimise the risks of spreading the virus so that, initially, some staff will be able to safely return to work, and later, some access to documents and resources will be possible in the Searchroom.

We are liaising with other archive services and considering guidance from the National Archives and elsewhere around issues relating specifically to the risks around providing access to archive collections.

Work continuing: Although the building has been closed, some regular work has carried on. For example, we have continued to answer email enquiries and maintain outreach via social media. But the change in circumstances has also provided opportunities to carry out some activities which may not otherwise have been done. These include:

- Data input for building plan catalogues
- Cataloguing of the Barrington deeds (D/DbA T4) – a collection of 253 medieval deeds
- Conversion of Conservation reports to electronic form

Talks and events: Unfortunately, we have had to cancel some major events, including the mini-conference in Clacton to mark the anniversary of the first mainland civilian casualties of the Second World War, and the event to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the opening of the ERO building.

However, before the virus took hold in earnest, we were able to hold a very successful and enjoyable conference on the history of science. This included talks on the history of gas manufacture, brewing, textiles, public health and the development of fibre optics, as well as the industrial archaeology of Chelmsford and a fascinating romp through some of the scientific techniques currently being used in the field of archaeology. We are grateful to all of the speakers and attendees, and in particular to Adrian Corder-Birch for giving the conference a glowing review in the FHE Newsletter.

With physical distancing restrictions set to continue for some time, we do not expect to be able to run any of our 'Essex Record Office presents' monthly talks this year, but we are working on the possibility of running a number of talks as online events.

Financial implications: It is not clear yet exactly what the effect of the shutdown will be on the ERO budget. Although we have continued to receive income from Essex Archives Online subscriptions, we will have had a period of three months (at least) in which it has not been possible to earn income from the certificates service, the Conference Centre and other services. This will clearly have a significant impact.

Communicating Connections [Marconi oral history and digitisation of photographs] project: We have been able to appoint the Oral Historian/Project Officer and the Evaluator for this project. We expect work to start on this in July.

New Town archives:

- National Archives 'Networks for Change' funding: Application (on behalf of consortium of record offices and museums holding new town records) for funding to assist with establishing a subject-specific network. An initial application was rejected but feedback indicated that it should be resubmitted with changes. The application was being led by Buckinghamshire but (because the County Archivist of Bucks has moved on) ERO is now going to lead. The application was submitted in June and a decision is expected in July.
- National Archives 'Archives Revealed' cataloguing grant to catalogue Harlow Development Corporation records: We were successful at Round 1, but that is no guarantee of success at Round 2. The second round application will be submitted in mid-June.

Martin Astell