

## **REPORT ON LACOCK ARCHIVES**

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 This report seeks the support of Corsham Area Board for Wiltshire Council to apply for external funding to help acquire an important and valuable archive relating to Lacock Abbey.

### **2. Background**

- 2.1 The historic archives of the Talbot family of Lacock Abbey and elsewhere, dating back to the 12th century, have been on deposit at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre since 1991. (Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre is a joint service of Wiltshire Council and Swindon Borough Council.) The current owner is now planning to sell the collection, but would like to keep the collection together and keep it in the public domain, and therefore her preferred purchaser is Wiltshire Council.
- 2.2 Archives are the leading source of historical evidence. The archives of Lacock Abbey and the families which owned it form a unique collection for the history of the local area. It contains over 100 boxes of archives, arising from the lives and work of the Talbot, Davenport and Feilding families and their estates, from the 12<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It includes estate records, personal papers, naval records, and material relating to the East India Company, amongst others.
- 2.3 Lacock itself is a very special village which has remained virtually unchanged for decades, thanks to the stewardship of the Talbot family and their generous gift of the village to the National Trust. Its great historical interest enables Lacock to contribute significantly to the local economy via tourism. The archives are integral to a good understanding of this historic settlement. In addition they are important for the family history of those who were tenants of the estate, as well as for general academic research. There is also an on-going legal value to the records, for example, to help with foot path, boundary or other property-based issues.
- 2.4 Any large estate or family archive is a complex jigsaw puzzle – the pieces of it interlink and cannot be removed without affecting the meaning and value of the whole. It is therefore vital that the collection can be kept intact. It is also vital for ease of research that it remains publicly accessible.
- 2.5 It should be noted that the present archive does not include the pre-eminent collection of correspondence, papers, photographic images

and books of William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877), the pioneer of photography. In 2006 his descendants (including the owner of the present archive) generously donated the W. H. Fox Talbot papers to the British Library. The family papers that remain with the Lacock Archive do, however, include much of interest in relation to Fox Talbot's life and his close family, and provide the background and context of his upbringing.

### **3. Proposal**

- 3.1 The purchase price is likely to be very high and therefore Wiltshire will have to apply for external funding. We have approached various funding bodies and the most suitable source of funding appears to be a Heritage Lottery Fund Heritage Grant, with a timeline of approximately one year in total. A Heritage Grant can only be up to a maximum of 95% of the purchase price, and therefore the applicant, ie Wiltshire Council, will have to contribute 5% either as cash or 'in kind', for example through volunteer hours. Potential assistance with funding will be sought from all possible sources and local support will be especially welcome. The application will not just be to acquire the archive, but also to plan activities to help people understand and enjoy the collection.
- 3.2 As part of the application for grant funding, it is vital to demonstrate that there is support for this project in the local community hence this presentation to the Corsham Area Board to canvass the Board's opinions and seek their support for the principle of purchasing this collection. We wish to explore how the Board might be further involved, for example engaging community volunteers. Wiltshire Council is not currently in a position to provide any financial support to help acquire the collection itself but is proposing to contribute officer time to write the application and manage the project if successful.

### **4. Reasons for Proposal**

- 4.1 The following benefits would arise from a successful Heritage Grant application:
  - Acquiring the archive will prevent it being split up, thus enhancing its usefulness for research, and will ensure it remains publicly accessible for the people of Wiltshire, for posterity
  - The grant would significantly improve access by paying for staff time to catalogue the collection and make the catalogue available on-line
  - The grant will include funding to help people from all different backgrounds, including children and young people, to understand the collection and use it more – for example through educational resources and the creation of an exhibition at Lacock Abbey which would enhance visitor experience of this important heritage site,

(location for many TV series and films), and help to reveal the community behind the village's history

- The project provides an opportunity to involve the wider community in volunteering to help with preservation, cataloguing, indexing and other tasks. Volunteers would enhance their soft skills which might provide for some a pathway leading to a return to work. This work would be a blue-print for future community projects.

## **5. Recommendation**

- 5.1 That Corsham Area Board supports the proposed application by Wiltshire Council for a Heritage Grant to acquire the Lacock Archive. That anyone who would like to be involved with the proposed project in a voluntary capacity, or by making a donation, is advised to get in touch with Claire Skinner or Terry Bracher at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre.

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### **Background Papers**

None

### **Appendices**

None