

The Austin & Wyatt Document Recovery Project

This is a joint project between the Bishop's Waltham Museum Trust and the Bishop's Waltham Society.

Background

In 1836 Richard Austin started a business in Bishop's Waltham as an Estate Agent (in the original sense of the words – managing large estates). He also became a well-known Auctioneer, holding regular auctions at the Crown Inn in Bishop's Waltham as well as many other places (including pony sales in the New Forest).

He owned the brick works on Coppice Hill and lived in Coppice House. He subsequently bought the town house in the Square (probably built by Thomas Fox in the early 1790s) where Austin & Wyatt's offices were until early summer 2019. Austin & Wyatt was owned for a good number of years by Countrywide Estate Agents but this branch office of was recently closed and its staff moved to Southampton. Countrywide's share price has plummeted from 312p in 2014 to 4.8p in 2019.

The Documents

In 2012, the manager at this Bishop's Waltham branch invited the then chairman of the Town Team to look at the documents stored on the premises. The Town Team chairman, Tony Kippenberger, was also chairman of the Bishop's Waltham Society (BW Society) and he spent a couple of hours looking at old documents dispersed through the building. It was clear that these were an invaluable resource to discover more about the past in Bishop's Waltham (estate maps, property details, rent ledgers, house inventories, tithe books etc.) as well as in wider Hampshire.

However, there were so many that the Museum at the time (17/2/2013) felt there was too much for them to cope with and so it was suggested that the manager contact the Hampshire Record Office (HRO).

In 2014 Sarah Farley of the HRO came to BW to inspect the documents and made a list of what she saw. The HRO offered to take them everything, but Countrywide decided to keep them after all. They have languished on shelves and in attics ever since.

The New Opportunity

Having noticed in May 2019 that the Austin & Wyatt offices had closed, we wrote to A&W/Countrywide to ask about these documents but received no reply. So we kept our eyes open for a skip to arrive outside. In fact we spotted a white van loading office equipment in June and so Tony Kippenberger and Alan Inder were able to enquire what was happening to the old documents.

As a result we met Countrywide's Senior Estates Manager, Chris Maher, on 11th July to look at them. He confirmed that they wouldn't be destroyed but he expected the new owners/leaseholders (another firm of Estate Agents) to want to keep them. A proposal we found unlikely, so we sought his assurance that the new owners would let us know if they didn't want to continue storing them.

Sure enough, we were contacted by Charters Estate Agents in late July to say they didn't want them and a further assessment visit was arranged for the 2nd August with Wendy Mortimer (PA to the Charters' Directors). This led us to believe that we will need to pack and store some 65 boxes of documents and a 2+ foot high pile of very large scale Ordnance Survey and other maps.

The Plan

The BW Society currently uses StorAway, based at The Old Hambledon Racecourse, Sheardley Lane, Droxford, SO32 3QY, to store its archives. We plan to do the same with these documents until they can be individually inspected and catalogued. The maps will be stored in a lock-up in Free Street. The HRO have confirmed that they will take anything the BW Museum doesn't want to keep.

The documents and records are currently in several rooms and two attics in the Austin & Wyatt building. They are mixed in with recent Countrywide records – many of which are piled on top! These need to be removed before any recovery is possible.

Charters have now confirmed that they expect to complete purchase of the building on Friday 30th August. Countrywide should have removed their final records and so we have a small window of opportunity to box up these valuable documents and remove them before Charters' builders arrive to undertake significant repair work (especially in the attics!). **This 'window' is likely to be between 31st August and 8th September.**

What we need...

There are several things that the BW Society and BW Museum need to make this rescue of very valuable documents possible. We have already approached the Scouts and Army Cadets as well as the Minibus Group but basically we need, brainpower, 'young muscle', and transport:

1. Volunteers who can turn 65 flat pack cardboard boxes into three-dimensional ones and (wearing rubber gloves and protective face masks) pack each one with records etc.
2. Volunteers (wearing rubber gloves and protective face masks) to roll 3-5 very large maps and then secure them with rubber bands and pack them upright into cardboard boxes and tie them together at the top with string
3. Volunteers to carry most of these down several flights of stairs (a human chain is proposed) to an office where they will be briefly inspected, named and numbered
4. Volunteers to then carry these boxes to available transport to take document boxes to StorAway and rolled maps to a store in Free Street
5. Vehicle(s) to do the transporting
6. Volunteers to unload the 65 boxes at StorAway's premises and another/same group to unload maps in Free Street.

(NB actions 4-6 could take place on a second day if necessary)

It would be great to involve other community members in Bishop's Waltham in this rescue operation!

We hope you may be able to help. Please contact Penny Copeland, the Museum Curator, at penny.copeland@btinternet.com. Ideally copying in the Society's secretary Eileen Rainey at secretary@bishops-walthamsociety.org.uk