

Ray of hope for the poor old Red House

ECHO STAFF REPORTER

FOR many months the Red House Museum, Christchurch, has been caught in the cross-fire of local government re-organisation.

Supporters of this museum of regional importance have been driven almost to despair by uncertainty for its future after April 1.

Hampshire and Dorset County Councils have been arguing interminably over whose responsibility it will be, with Christchurch District Council sitting uncomfortably in the middle trying to influence events for the best.

At long last, with only weeks before the picturesque Red House plummets into Dorset, a ray of hope can be glimpsed on the horizon.

BY APRIL 1

The chief executive officers of the two counties are getting together to try to work out a scheme for running the premises acceptable to both their authorities. A decision is expected by April 1.

Had the museum continued to be run by private trustees, as it was until 1971, the present crisis would never have arisen.

But the poor old Red House never really had much choice but to come under county care. Since it opened in 1951 it has hardly ever been able to make ends meet.

Work had grown to such an extent a larger staff was needed than the one full-time curator, Mr. John Lavender, and his part-time assistant Mrs. Beryl Druitt.

It came as a rude awakening to many, therefore, when the county museum service promptly abolished both these posts and Mr. Lavender instead found himself keeper of geology at Winchester.

Since then the Red House has been a museum without any curatorial staff of its own. It's reduced to receiving visits from Mr. Lavender on two days a week and from Mrs. Druitt, now part-time conservation officer at Winchester, on one day.

PART-TIME

Otherwise it relies on a resident attendant, a part-time cleaner, and part-time gardener.

This is the result of the county's policy not to keep their regional museums staffed full-time but to centralise resources. There are advantages in this and to be fair to the county they have seen the Red House has received its share of whatever finances are available for improving it.

But because there is so often no curator on the spot the public have not been taking as much interest in the museum as they might have been.

Perhaps the biggest bone of contention locally has been the transfer of the museum's mass of historical documents to Winchester. The Red House Friends, at their recent annual meeting, made an anxious call for them to be returned.

TO BE RESTORED

A small proportion had previously come back, and assurances have now been given the whole collection will be restored to Christchurch in due course.

But in these circumstances, elderly local historian Mr. Donovan Lane refused to give his own collection of documents to the museum and instead handed it over to fellow historian Mr. Allen White.

As for the major issue of who runs the museum, the problem is part-legal and part-political.

It seems obvious Dorchester should take over the trust that passed to Winchester three years ago as by next month the museum will be in their county.

But unlike Hampshire they have no county museum service and up to now have not appeared keen to take on the extra financial burden, especially if it could lead to demands for more support of other museums in the county.

More than anyone the museum staff can't wait for the misery to end.