

MUSEUM MANAGEMENT JOINT WORKING PARTY held at 7.30 pm at SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM on 17 AUGUST 1999

Present:- Councillors Mrs J E Menell, D M Miller and G W Powers (Uttlesford Members); Ms S Kirkpatrick, E Planterose and A Watson (Museum Society).

Also present:- Councillor R J O'Neill.

Officers in attendance:- Mrs C Allison and A Forrow.

I. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN FOR THE MEETING

It was agreed that Councillor Mrs J E Menell be appointed Chairman for the meeting.

I. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor R C Smith and N B Newman.

The Chairman welcomed Councillor R J O'Neill to his first meeting of the Working Party following the decision at the previous meeting that he be invited to sit in on the meetings following his appointment as the Council's representative on the Museums in Essex Committee.

I. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The notes of the meeting held on 27 May 1999 were received.

I. BUSINESS ARISING

(i) Curator's House

Concern about the situation regarding the work to be carried out at the Curator's house had been expressed at a recent meeting of the Museum Society. Mrs Allison reported that her latest information was that the work was to be carried out from November onwards with the first stage being completed before Christmas and the second early in the New Year. The nature of the work was such that the house would need to be empty and Mrs Allison could be accommodated in the Lodge House, formerly occupied by the Steward, at the Council's Saffron Walden offices. Mrs Allison commented that the proposed timing of the works was inconvenient to her personally and she would prefer the work to be carried out in one piece either before or after Christmas. The Working Party noted that this matter had been under discussion for many months and was extremely concerned at the lack of precise information on the nature and timetable of the works to be carried out. It was also conscious of the need to minimise the personal inconvenience to Mrs Allison. The view was also expressed that there was a possibility that the Council might be in breach of the covenant relating to maintenance of the property.

The Working Party agreed to express its concern at the situation, to request that the work be brought forward so as to be completed before Christmas and minimise the disruption to Mrs Allison; and that a full report be made to the next meeting of the Amenities Sub-Committee.

(ii) Report of the Chairman of the Museum Society Management Committee

In answer to a question from Councillor Powers the Curator said that it had not been possible to complete the investigations into a computerised system for subscriptions but that this would be pursued.

I. REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN OF THE MUSEUM SOCIETY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

In the absence of Mr Newman, Mr Watson gave a brief report on the AGM of the Museum Society. Messrs Newman and Watson had been re-elected as Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively of the Society Management Committee. As indicated earlier, the Society was concerned regarding the Curator's house.

At the meeting, the Curator had reported on a request from the National Museum of Australia, for the loan for an exhibition to be launched in 2001 of an Australian war club which formed part of one of this Museum's earliest collections. Despite the source of the request, a number of aspects caused the Curator some anxiety. For example, the request did not contain many details of the exhibition or the timescale of the loan. It was important that the interests of the Council and the Society were protected and, in the circumstances, the Curator had asked for more details from the applicant Museum, including information on what other loans had been requested. The Working Party discussed the possible implications of the request and agreed with the Curator's view that, if it was decided to accede to the request, a tight contract would be needed and the advice of the Head of Legal Services should be sought.

At the Society's AGM, the plan to celebrate the Millennium by holding a Garden Party had also been discussed, as had the need to attract younger members. The latter was difficult in the current accommodation. It was considered that a new school room was required which could also be let out for meetings and possibly developed as a visitor centre. A sub-committee was to be set up to consider this. In this connection, the report prepared by Val Bott would be useful and it was agreed that a copy should be made available to the Museum Society.

The Working Party discussed the possibility of obtaining a lottery grant towards funding such a proposal, although it was noted that, at present, lottery funding for buildings was much reduced. At the same time, the point could be emphasised that the building was required primarily for educational purposes.

I. CURATOR'S REPORT

The Working Party considered the Curator's report for the period April to June 1999.

Through the generosity of the Museum Society, the Museum had received a collection of 23 fourth century Roman silver coins known as the Lindsell Hoard. This was still in conservation and would be a centre piece of the Museum's next major exhibition. The current exhibition 'Jaws, Claws and Paws' had proved very successful. Two special days were to be held on Thursday 19 August and Thursday 26 August. The first would be devoted to woodlands and the second to the rainforest.

The Curator also drew attention to the Outreach work being carried out by Lynn Morrison in providing assistance to the Saffron Walden Archive Society. The first of the Millennium exhibitions '2000 years of Treasures' was being prepared and a private view would be held on the morning of Saturday 16 October to which all members of the Council would be invited.

Research had continued on the proposed display of the Great Chesterford material as this important material had not been available for public view in the Museum. In addition to a cheque for £400 from the Great Chesterford Archeological Group towards the cost of a display case, the Museum Society had agreed to make a contribution from the Great Hall Fund. A transparency of a reconstruction painting of Great Chesterford in Roman times had been received from Peter Froste. It was noted in passing that BAA had not made any similar contribution in relation to the possible display of the Stansted material. The Museum would not accept any further material from the Airport site on the current terms. The Working Party discussed the present County Council policy under which all Museums in the County took all material coming from archaeological digs. This policy did not apply to items given other disciplines offered to the Museum. The policy was considered unsatisfactory and the Curator had asked for it to be raised at the next meeting of Essex Curators. It was agreed that, if possible, the issue should also be raised at an appropriate meeting of the Museums in Essex Committee and the Curator would discuss this further with Councillor O'Neill.

School visits continued to be successful with the ancient Egyptians still featuring heavily in the Education Officer's teaching sessions. In answer to a question from Councillor Powers, the Curator confirmed that the Museum could keep pace with the national curriculum. In this regard it appeared that Victorians would be replacing the Ancient Egyptians to some extent in the curriculum. Local history recorders had been invited to the Museum to inform them of the Museum's resources which might be useful and to provide the opportunity to obtain information from them. A principal aim was to encourage use of the Museum in a wider community context. Outreach was very important.

In relation to collections management, the pest problem had been less serious than feared. There would be a week long 'team clean' in December. There was no risk of anybody coming into contact with hazardous materials. Solar film had been applied to the Great Hall windows and had proved extremely satisfactory. The possibility of using it for the offices on the south side of the building was being pursued.

In relation to documentation, funding had been obtained to use the services of Jamie Everitt on a short term contract and he had now started work.

The Curator was working with other Museums in the District and exciting developments were coming up in Dunmow. Also, the Ashdon Museum would be moving into the former Labour Hall from its current premises.

Discussions were continuing on replacing the thatched roof in the Great Hall and investigations were being carried out into appropriate materials. Museum staff were looking at what other Museums had done. The intention was to write a paper about the incident to alert other museums of the potential hazard if they used a substantial amount of thatching materials in a gallery.

A working group of officers and volunteers had carried out visits to other museums who used an electronic till system. A demonstration had been arranged on 24 August for volunteers and staff of a till which the Curator had seen. The Chief Executive was keen that, if the till seemed appropriate, a three month trial should be arranged. In any event, a number of management problems would need to be resolved.

The Curator reported that the papers relating to applying for designation had arrived with a very short deadline. Advice had been received that this round was mainly a mopping-up operation and our bid was unlikely to be successful. In any event, largely due to the personal difficulties the Curator had experienced lately, she would be unable to meet the deadline. However, work would be carried out to ensure that we were ready when the next opportunity arose. In answer to a question, the Curator confirmed that the Museum would not be put at a significant disadvantage by not gaining designation. Obtaining the status meant that a Museum could apply for challenge fund money, but matching funding would be needed.

The Museum Society had been added to the consultation list for the consultant's report on the Leisure Strategy.

In relation to the regionalisation of the South-East Museum Service, disaggregation had not yet been completed. The South-East Museums Service AGM was coming up and Councillor Powers would discuss this with Councillor O'Neill.

Officers were considering whether the workshop on the Museum should precede or follow a general open evening for Members on all the Council's services which was likely to be held on 8 November. The Working Party agreed that any workshop should concentrate on the variety of work carried out at the Museum rather than taking the form of a simple guided tour.

The Working Party expressed their thanks to the Curator for her report.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm.