

SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM

CURATOR'S QUARTERLY REPORT October - December 2002

1 Museum Management and Staff

1.1 Management

Strategic Plan

This has been a highly successful quarter for grant-aid in support of long-term projects on collections and documentation: a **significant award from the Heritage Lottery Fund** for the Myddylton place tapestry fragments and a historic Beauvais tapestry and a **grant from MuSE/EEMLAC** (the new Eastern England Museums, Libraries and Archives Council) to extend the documentation of botanical collections. This was only possible because of the Museum Society's initial grant, which was used as 'matching funding' to attract the EEMLAC grant.

Meanwhile plans for the new **Resource Centre** have been delayed while the Council and BAA (Stansted) have been involved in discussions over the legal agreement pertaining to the Airport's planning application. £32,000 has been offered by BAA towards the storage of the archaeological archive from the Stansted excavations but despite encouraging discussions on site last summer, it is still not clear if the site for the proposed Resource Centre will be made available. The Curator has informally discussed the project with the regional HLF Office, who expressed interest and encouraged the Museum to contact the HLF again as soon as negotiations can move forward.

Best Value Review

The final report has now been presented to the Community Services Committee and an Action Plan drawn up for the Museum and the Museum Society to pursue. Thanks are due to the officers and members of Museum Society Committee who formed the Museum Society Best Value Working Party for the additional work they have put in, and to Arts & Business East and 'critical friend' Linda Scrutton, who is continuing to assist staff informally on human resource management.

Corporate Support

In pursuit of one of Best Value Review's recommendations, the Museum has appointed local management consultants Campaign One to organise an evening reception on Thursday 27th March 2003 to promote the Museum among the local business community. Planning this important event and the accompanying brochure has already begun. Museum Society Committee members will be invited and it is hoped that this will assist the Society's own plans to introduce a Corporate Membership category in the near future.

Electronic Till

Further preliminary work completed, but more is needed before implementation and training.

1.2 Staff

Sarah Hammond has been recruited as Documentation Assistant (Natural History) to work on Botany collections and starts work in 13 January 2003.

1.3 Volunteers and Work Experience

Our volunteers and weekend staff continue to be invaluable. Particular thanks to Roger Kirkpatrick and David Holmes for 'holding the fort' over Christmas and New Year, and during flood alert. A thank-you party for volunteers to be held in early January. Sophie Daniel, a return-to-work student, has started a 40-hour administration placement. Barbara Stubbington continues to work on textiles

and picture mounting as well as display work as required.

1.4 Training and Meetings Attended

Appraisal training for new UDC scheme (all staff).

The Visitor Services Officer attended a marketing seminar 'How are we doing?' on evaluation and audience development; also the AGM of MAGDA (now retired from committee).

1.5 Health & Safety

A Health & Safety assessment of the herbarium was organised to assess possible presence of mercuric chloride (Natural Sciences Officer), but no contamination was found when it was monitored in January 2003 by Dr Baxter of the Occupational Health Team, Adenbrookes Hospital.

2 Buildings and Site

2.1 Museum Building

The Museum has apparently been unaffected by extremes of weather following recent remedial work. However, there has been a spate of problems with the old oil-fired boilers, and on one occasion excessive smoke brought a visit from the fire brigade. With the co-operation of IT and Property Services and contractors, the opportunity has therefore been taken to install a duct for a future gas supply in the computer-cable trench dug at the very end of the year. This brings forward the possibility of renewing the heating system, and reduces the potential costs.

2.2 Laboratory/Schoolroom

Trenching as above, and rewiring to connect the lab, school room and store to the computer network and the internet; also the outside light over the drive is being replaced.

2.3 Newport Store

Heavy rainfall at New Year led to the threat of minor flood incursions at the off-site store. Staff followed the procedures in the Emergency Plan, shutting off the electrical supply temporarily as a precaution, but in the event no water appears to have penetrated the store, although the surrounding depot yard was flooded.

2.4 40 Castle Street

Repairs to neighbouring rear fence following gales were carried out by contractors for UDC.

2.5 Grounds and Castle Site

A tree was planted in memory of Malcolm Adams, former Society Treasurer, with assistance from tree warden Heather Salvidge, attended by Mary Adams, friends and colleagues. The severe gale in November necessitated the removal of the horse chestnut by the driveway gate, and the reduction of trees by the Workshop, and the gate to the tennis club. The occupant of the cottage at 3 Museum Yard has had a soak-away constructed to prevent the cottage drain-pipes discharging onto the Museum drive, and has kindly agreed that the Museum can attach a security light to the corner of the cottage, to provide additional light for staff and visitors after dusk.

3 Collections and Research

3.1 Acquisitions

6 acquisitions this quarter, including a 17th-century tradesman's token purchased at auction.

The Museum also commissioned from local carver Dave Lewis, two copies of the historic pargeting stamp displayed in the Local History Gallery. The copies will be available for loan to decorate local buildings, or for use for activities and demonstrations in the Museum.

3.2 Collections Care and Conservation

HLF Your Heritage Award of £28,500 for Tapestries which will go to two specialist textile conservators early in 2003 for one-two years treatment and subsequent storage and display. Once repaired, cleaned and backed, the fragments will be displayed in turn in the furniture Gallery. This has been a highly satisfactory outcome for this long-term project. The application was prepared by the Conservation Officer with assistance from the Curator.

Other care of collections work has included:

- About 50 objects were taken to Lincoln University for treatment under supervision, and completed items were returned.
- Carole Humphreys, a textiles expert from the Fitzwilliam Museum, has been researching and dating some of the Museum's collections.
- Costumes that have been on display in the gallery a long time have been taken back into store, while other items have been displayed on mannequins.

Remedial conservation work has included:

- A small amount of work on Quaker objects for display and the geology exhibition
- Treatment of: two billhooks, a mounted fox, a Bronze Age axe, a Tudor joint stool, a clock case, a Roman coin, Korean fibre coat and recently excavated Great Dunmow bronze Roman objects including two mirrors - some by a conservation student on placement from Lincoln who also assisted with display preparation and the cleaning of objects in the Oceania case which has particularly difficult access

3.3 Documentation

Number of new accessions catalogued: 2

SEAX Digital Image project

Preparation and photography for this project have absorbed a great deal of staff time, especially the Documentation & Exhibition Officers'. During photography it has been necessary to close galleries at times, although this has been kept to a minimum.

So far, digital images have been taken for:

- 270 social history items
- 103 textiles items
- 51 numismatics items
- 300 archaeology items
- 100 2D items
- 161 zoology and geology specimens

Modes catalogue records completed or edited for SEAX:

- 57 natural history records produced (Natural Sciences Officer)
- 105 textiles records (Documentation & Exhibitions Officers)
- 270 social history records

Work continues in the New Year.

An EEMLAC Grant of £2,500 for documentation of botanical collections has been secured. The application was made by the Natural Sciences Officer with assistance from the Curator.

3.4 Loans In

Loans In: 2

- Moon rock (lunar samples disc) and meteorites on loan for 2 weeks (NASA, PPARC and Natural History Museum).
- Geology specimens for the *Treasures of the Earth* exhibition : 9 from Sedgwick Museum of

Earth Sciences and 1 from a member of the Museum Society.

3.5 Loans Out

Loans Out: 1 request – North American beaded garter pendants, late 18th century

Committee is asked to approve a request for the loan of E395 Pair of Garter Pendants, North America (eastern Great Lakes), to the exhibition *Braids and Beyond*, November 2003 – September 2004. The exhibition is being co-ordinated by the Braid Society and will be shown at three registered museums, Newarke House Museum, Leicester; the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle; and the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. Comprehensive reports on the facilities, environmental control, security etc have been received from all three venues and it is the Curator's recommendation that this loan request is approved.

3.6 Object Identification and Enquiries

Object identifications this quarter: 13

Collection Enquiries this quarter: 173 by phone, fax, email, letter or casual enquiries in person (without an appointment)

3.7 Researchers

7 research visits in person, including herbarium collections by staff of Cambridge University Herbarium; bird collection documentation research by member of the Essex Birdwatching Society.

4 Displays and Visitor Services

4.1 Permanent Galleries

- Some costumes on display have been changed, as noted above
- Oceania and Polynesia labels upgraded in Ethnography gallery, and most objects now replaced after cleaning of cases
- An overhaul of dated and unreliable light fittings is in hand; it has proved very difficult to find local electrical contractors willing and able to take on the work.
- Further work on the Furniture Gallery is awaiting a possible grant from Saffron Walden Round Table (result of application expected end of January)

4.2 Temporary Exhibitions

Quaker Walden and Friends' School exhibition dismantled in November with help from Colin Bazley. It drew a lot of interest from local people and Quakers over a wide area.

Treasures of the Earth exhibition installed with Gerald Lucy, who designed the displays and graphics, and provided most of the dazzling specimens. Very well liked by both adults and children, specialists and general visitors, it runs until March 2003. Preliminary work has begun on *Framed and Plastered* telling the story of timber-framed buildings. It is hoped to stage a day of related building crafts in the grounds in May, with the encouragement and assistance of Hibbs & Walsh. Ridgeons and other relevant local businesses have also been approached for sponsorship, and assistance has been offered by staff of UDC Planning and ECC Heritage & Conservation.

The Curator met with representatives of TRANSCO and Network Archaeology of Lincoln in November concerning the archaeology brought to light by the recent Cambridge - Matching Green pipeline. Finds and data are currently being analysed by Network Archaeology but it is hoped that a small portable exhibition on screens might be provided for the Museum to offer to village venues along the pipeline's route. This has yet to be confirmed by TRANSCO.

4.3 Visitor Services

Visitors

	Public		Schools		Total	
	2002	2001	2002	2001	2002	2001
October	1283	1262	622	535	1905	1797
November	1326*	879	524	822	1850	1346
December	659	866	286	375	945	1241
Total	3268	2652	1432	1732	4700	4382

*boosted by Moon Rock Day and visiting 'space man'.

Shop

	2002	2001
October	1382.33	1111.15
November	1195.15	1005.95
December	253.18	608.58
Total £	2830.66	2725.68

Tickets

	2002	2001
October	645.00	557.50
November	552.00	256.50
December	383.50	355.00
Total £	1580.50	1169.00

Donations

	2002	2001
October	41.91	62.60
November	36.73	36.46
December	28.84	30.08
Total £	107.48	129.14

Publicity and Marketing

The Museum, and staff, have featured in a number of national and regional television and radio programmes, with pride of place going to Wallace the lion. Local press continue to provide extensive and supportive coverage, and news of the Lottery grant spread fast. A television interview for the BBC in Newport – BBC Look East 'Ask Carol' resulted in a 20 second film of the Natural Sciences Officer talking about the pudding stone boulder at Newport village hall and included a mention of the collections at Saffron Walden Museum.

The Quaker and geology exhibitions have featured in specialist journals, and have received some 'fan mail'. An excellent colour poster was commissioned for the geology exhibition. The Museum's Christmas card was an entirely in-house production, with the aid of a volunteer. A visitor questionnaire was circulated on behalf of a museum studies student; the results confirm our own findings. Saffron Walden County High School pupils also surveyed visitors.

A re-designed and accessible web-site is proposed for the Museum with the assistance of IT Services, but has yet to be programmed into the coming year's work schedules.

5 Education, Events and Outreach

5.1 Education

Number of booked school sessions taken by Education Officer: 50

Additional SATS days have slightly decreased the no. of days schools have available for outings.

Number of school loan boxes sent out: 2

5.2 Events at Museum

22-23 October **Half-term Activities** – attended by 180 children

23 November **Moon Rock Day** – visitors viewed, handled and asked questions about Moon Rock & Meteorites (Natural Sciences Officer and G Lucy). There were also performances by an actor from the Science Museum in role as astronaut Gene Cernan (arranged by Education Officer). Well attended by 578 members of the public.

25 November **Treasurers of the Earth Lecture** by Gerald Lucy. Attended by 35 members of the public and Museum Society members

1 December **Christmas family workshop** – 40 children and parents joined in making ‘traditional’ decorations for the Museum’s Xmas tree.

A meeting of teachers and other interested professionals from the Essex Cultural Services team discussed multi-cultural activities and attitudes, with input from the Museum. As a result there may be funding for an artist in residence (Education Officer).

5.3 Outreach

Museum activities at other venues:

- Saffron Walden County High School Farm Club Christmas Fair (Visitor Services Officer)

Other Museums and Local Groups supported

Museum staff have attended meetings, undertaken work or given advice to:

- Fry Art Gallery Society (2 Committee meetings – Curator)
- Searchers Metal-Detecting Club (2 meetings – Curator)
- Essex Amphibian & Reptile Group (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Essex Biodiversity Action Plan (EBAP) (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Essex Wildlife Trust (Uttlesford) Committee (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Local Agenda 21 Farming, Wildlife & Countryside Group (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Local Agenda 21 Forum (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Special Roadside Verges Committee (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Uttlesford Nature Conservation Working (Natural Sciences Officer).

Advice, support and involvement in organisations outside Uttlesford

The Visitor Services Officer is regularly approached by other museums on access issues, particularly relating to disabled visitors and staff.

- Cater Museum, Billericay sought conservation treatments and advice

Publications

The Museum and Tourist Information Centre have agreed to jointly publish a booklet on Henry Winstanley, following an approach from a local author (whose booklet on William Winstanley was published by the TIC a few years ago). The tercentenary of Henry Winstanley’s death falls in November 2003 but publication is planned for April to catch the visitor season at Audley End House, where Winstanley was Clerk of Works. Plymouth Museum & Art Gallery has been approached for use of some illustrations and may also be contributing to the publication. Work on this project has taken a significant amount of the Curator and TIC staff’s time.

Future Programme and Projects

Forthcoming major events and developments for information, and urgent matters arising since the end of the quarter.

1 Museum Management and Staff

13 January Sarah Hammond starts work on the Botany collections
27 March Reception for Local Businesses and launch of corporate support package

2 Buildings and Site

January Installation of network for computers in Laboratory and Schoolroom annex

3 Collections and Research

3 – 18 February SEAX photography of the natural history collections continues
January – March Museum data base records continue to be created and up-dated for SEAX

4 Displays and Visitor Services

Temporary exhibition: *Framed and Plastered* on local timber-framed houses, to be planned for April opening and demonstration event Saturday 17th May

5 Events, Education and Outreach

January – March Archaeology Evening Classes on Wednesday evenings (except half-term)
15 March Geology Activity Day for Science Week
February 'Funny Money' activities for half-term
early April Proposed publication on Henry Winstanley in conjunction with TIC, Plymouth Museum (to be confirmed) and local author