

SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM

CURATOR'S QUARTERLY REPORT October – December 2003

1 Museum Management and Staff

1.1 Management

Strategic Plan and Best Value Improvement Plan: Resource Centre

Initial informal talks with Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) officers in November have paved the way for the Museum to work up and submit an application during 2004, subject to approval. The aim is to replace the offsite store with a purpose-built Resource Centre and make the reserve collections more accessible to a wider audience through improvements to outreach services, internet and direct access. A total project cost in the region of £1million is anticipated, however current changes to HLF funding mean that HLF will be unable to offer as high a proportion of funding as previously, therefore additional fund-raising will be necessary. HLF have also emphasised the importance of outreach work to new audiences, which will require further work for the application. David Demery has drafted sketch plans as a discussion point and received some guidance on the requirements of planning and the Environment Agency. A project team has been assembled to meet on 4th February (2pm) and the Museum Society is invited to be represented on this Team if it wishes.

New Website for Museum

The Museum website is being completely redesigned by IT services working with Museum staff and consultants Media Paradigm. Although it will remain part of the Uttlesford District Council website, the Museum will also have its own website address www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org. The first pages are expected to be available shortly; the complete website will be extensive (over 60 pages) and users will eventually be able to search the Museum's collections database online.

Electronic Till

Trials now due after final sessions with TIC staff and Fry Scales in February.

1.2 Staff

Due to changes in the Access to Work scheme contract, a new employment agency is supplying the Support Worker for Natural Sciences Officer. Since mid-November, the Museum has been piloting the Council's new flexitime scheme (within the restrictions imposed by the nature of the Service), which is highlighting the additional hours needed to fulfil some functions.

1.3 Volunteers and Work Experience

Deborah Chancellor, a new conservation volunteer, has made dust covers for some objects, input data onto the computer and is helping to process returning objects from Lincoln University's Department of Conservation. Lena Panov finished her work on remounting herbarium specimens. Barbara Stubbington worked on textiles in the Lab, and mounted prints for the current exhibition.

1.4 Training and Meetings Attended

All staff, including Saturday and Casual Assistants, attended UDC training on CPA (Continuous Performance Assessment)
MAGDA AGM and seminar on Access Policies in Cardiff (Visitor Services Officer)
Education Officers meeting at Braintree (Education Officer)
Essex Tourism Forum and Great Days Out group meetings (Curator & VSO)
Essex Museum Workers – special half-day seminar at Luton Museum on HLF project and new Luton Life galleries (Documentation & Exhibitions Officer, Curator)

1.5 Health & Safety

Occasional problems with disruptive youngsters continue and the police have been informed. As they tend to visit the Museum at the weekends staff, supported by some members of the Museum Society, have been asked to be especially vigilant at these times. Liaison has now been established with the Community Police Officers, who are including the Museum on their weekend beat and keeping an eye on the offenders. New risk assessments have been completed for both working at the Museum and off-site.

2 Buildings and Site

2.1 Museum Building

Upgrade to Intruder Alarm System

Intruder alarm systems installed in both the main Museum and Lab/ Schoolroom buildings were upgraded by Saffron Security in October. As well as replacing some outdated equipment, the new system now complies with Police regulation DD243 and will be easier to use, with hopefully less chance of false alarms. Britton Fire of Wymondham have now taken over the maintenance of the fire systems.

Upgrade to Central Heating

The new smaller boiler installed by Aqua in August has been beset with problems. Firstly, during work to install a new flue a small quantity of asbestos was discovered in the wall of the plant room. This required stabilising before work could continue. Then a sub-contractor supplied a flue of the incorrect size. Finally Aqua experienced problems in finding a qualified electrician who would be able to install the necessary electrical connections for this boiler. The system was finally commissioned on 22nd December, but continues to work fitfully and further work is in progress.

Damp penetration, Local History and Ceramics Galleries

The rain water hoppers and drain-pipes on the west end of the building were unable to cope with heavy rain and strong winds in late November. Water overflowed from two hoppers causing damp penetration in the Ceramics Gallery and particularly lower down in the Local History Gallery. The delft tile panels from the Sun Inn were subsequently removed from display as a precaution. Uttlesford Contract Services have been called to clean out all the foul water drainage and replace loose tiles to the rear of the building. Otherwise the Security Officer has regularly monitored gutters during the autumn/winter and leaf-fall has not been a significant problem.

2.2 Laboratory/Schoolroom

The Organics Store in this building was thoroughly cleaned, including shelves, by a previous volunteer, who was paid for her services. Good housekeeping keeps pest

outbreaks at bay and more stores are to be tackled next year. A number of problems with the fabric of the building and also blocked gutters were noted.

2.3 Newport Store

A team of 5 museum staff successfully raised 5 large cabinets at the store up onto breeze-blocks. The cabinets were resting on the floor and this project will put the mineral collection and other geology items above the level of water if there are floods in the future. An increase in the number of flies has been noted with extra cleaning being required and the installation of fly papers, sticky traps, and monitoring pest traps in the four areas of the store.

2.4 40 Castle Street - nothing to report

2.5 Grounds and Castle Site

An enquiry from the new residents at 54B Castle Street led to a visit by Property Services and the Curator. The residents have requested the erection of a screen or fence opposite their guest bedroom window to mask the Museum Workshop Yard, but are willing to pay for the work. Details and costings have yet to be agreed.

3 Collections and Research

3.1 Acquisitions

10 acquisitions this quarter, including

- A collection of carpentry tools from a local carpenter
- Diary of an unknown soldier from Saffron Walden 1915 - 1916
- Bronze Romano-British figurine of Celtic warrior from Radwinter, purchased at auction in London by the Museum Society
- Intake of archaeological archives from a number of small sites (evaluations and watching briefs) excavated in recent years by Essex County Council Field Archaeology Unit and Archaeological Solutions

Documents and Manuscripts for deposit with Essex Record Office

A number of items have come into the Museum which would be more appropriately placed with the ERO for specialist care:

- Ledgers from Saffron Walden Co-op
- Thaxted deeds previously saved from clearance of Barclays Bank vaults, Thaxted
- Collection of documents relating to properties in Church Street, Saffron Walden

The collection relating to Church Street is likely to be of particular interest to local researchers and so discussions have been initiated with Saffron Walden Archive Society and the ERO with a view to undertaking some work on the documents and making them available to local historians before they are transferred to Chelmsford. The remaining Whittlesford Papers have now been deposited at Cambridgeshire Record Office as previously agreed.

3.2 Collections Care and Conservation

Care of collections has included:

Work on the Museum's pharmaceutical collections has led to the identification of

residues in three drugs jars as substances containing opiates. The Museum has therefore had to apply to the Home Office for a licence to possess opiates, and may receive a routine visit from a regional inspector.

The Natural Sciences Officer has been working at Newport store to sort out 5 drawers of minerals that were affected by flooding. The collections are now re-stored in the mineral cabinets and items requiring remedial conservation have been identified.

Remedial conservation work has included:

A Snowy Owl for the teaching collection has been cleaned and set on a new base and given a perspex display case. Shoes for the current exhibition were conserved and/or given individual mounts to support the fragile fabric as necessary. Conservation of several costume items took place, including an early 19th cent waistcoat treated by an external specialist and now on display in Costume Gallery. All the Myddylton Place tapestry fragments were returned fully conserved through HLF funding. Four of these can be displayed on a rotation basis, and two pieces are currently hung on the walls of the Furniture Gallery, the rest being in store.

3.3 Documentation

No of new accessions catalogued: 13

Backlog records updated: 119 (Natural History)

3.4 Loans In

Loans In: There have been no new loans in during this period

3.5 Loans Out

Loans Out: Two ethnographic loans which were previously agreed, have been made: two North American garter pendants to the 'Braids and Beyond' exhibition at Leicester, and a lacebark dress and brush for Len Pole's exhibition 'Second Skin' at Exeter Museum.

The Cuming Museum has requested a 'loan back' of five Carib objects for a year, March 2004 – March 2005. Negotiations are in progress as all five items are on display and the Cuming has been asked to consider substituting some objects from store instead to avoid creating a significant gap in the gallery.

3.6 Object Identification and Enquiries

Object identifications this quarter: 10

Collection Enquiries this quarter: 96 by phone, fax, email, letter or casual enquiries in person (without an appointment)

Portable Antiquities Scheme

The new Finds Liaison Officer for Essex, Caroline McDonald, has visited the museum, and two meetings of the Saffron Walden Searchers Metal Detecting Club with the Curator. In future, the FLO and Museum will be working together to encourage detectorists and other finders of archaeological objects to participate in the voluntary Portable Antiquities Scheme, and to co-ordinate and assist reporting of any finds of treasure. A finds recording event is being planned for National Archaeology weekend in July. Long-term plans could include arranging finds events at other

venues in Uttlesford, such as Dunmow Museum.

3.7 Researchers

14 research visits in person, including:

- PhD student researching 19th century colonial acquisitions of ethnography and natural history specimens, who stayed a whole week!
- A curator and a conservator from Southend Museum Service visited to view the *Shoe Show* and discuss storage and operational issues.

4 Displays and Visitor Services

4.1 Permanent Galleries

Ceramics Gallery - the complete redisplay of this gallery is being discussed by the Documentation & Exhibitions Officer (Julia Bazley) and Curator with ceramics expert Jonathan Dutton, who has kindly agreed to be specialist advisor for the project. A display brief and costings have yet to be developed but it will be necessary to raise a substantial (five-figure) sum to achieve a new, quality display. Full plans will be presented to Committee at a later date.

Furniture Gallery – work continues on the re-display, assisted by a visit from two specialists from the V&A Museum.

Discovery Centre: the video microscope interactive has been malfunctioning. Electrical testing by D Gibsone revealed that the camera is faulty. The Natural Sciences Officer is investigating repair or replacement of the camera. A new Hedgehog touch specimen has been purchased for the Discovery Centre

4.2 Temporary Exhibitions

The *Shoe Show* has continued to be popular, enhanced by the presence of David Beckham's football boots, and has provided inspiration for both the Big Draw activity in October and decorations made for the Museum Christmas Tree at a family activity.

4.3 Visitor Services

Visitors

	Public		Schools		Total	
	2003	2002	2003	2002	2003	2002
October	1447	1283	977	622	2424	1905
November	743	1340*	578	879	1321	2210
December	460	658	296	286	756	944
Total	2650	3281*	1851	1787	4501	5068*

* incl. 583 visitors for opening of geology exhibition with moon rock and 'astronaut'. Visitors have included members of the Silver Study Group; County Museum Officers from Eastern Region, and a few lighthouse keepers following the publication of the Henry Winstanley booklet.

Shop

	2003	2002
October	1121-25	1382-33
November	826-32	1195-15
December	595-29	253-18
Total £	2542-86	2830-66

Tickets

	2003	2002
October	618-00	654-00
November	327-00	552-00
December	219-00	383-50
Total £	1164-00	1589-50

Donations

	2003	2002
October	66-85	41-91
November	21-80	36-73
December	41-21	28-84
Total £	129-86	107-48

Publicity and Marketing

The Museum has joined forces and finances with the Tourist Information Centre to join the 'Great Days Out Around Cambridge' consortium. Local press and radio continue to give good coverage to the Museum's new acquisitions, events and exhibitions. There have also been visits from BBC and other television companies with particular interest in saffron and Bridge End Gardens. The Museum's own Christmas card was again as a useful marketing tool and promoter of goodwill.

Corporate Support

7 October Museum hired for private reception by local cosmetic dental practice
Other support has comprised sponsorship of £100 from The Railway, Saffron Walden towards art materials for The Big Draw; additional publicity for *Shoe Show* in Harts bookshop window, and the launch of the Museum Society's Corporate Membership Scheme on 30 October. Local businesses may be approached to support the possible return of the fund-raising 'Castle Rock' concerts in the Museum grounds.

5 Education, Events and Outreach

5.1 Education

No. of booked school sessions taken by Education Officer: 43, attended by 1102 children and 210 adults.

No. of school loan boxes sent out: 1 Tawny owl.

5.2 Events at Museum

- 13 October Museum Society lecture on City of London archaeology.
- 18 October ***The Big Draw***
- 28-29 October ***Chinese Childhood*** family activity, 4 drop-in sessions attended by 188 children and 90 adults. The theme was selected to tie in with the Essex Museums Cultural Diversity Festival.
- 30 October **Evening for Local Businesses**, also attended by representatives from Saffron Walden Initiative and Essex Businesslink.
- 10 November Museum Society lecture on **Henry Winstanley**, a portrait of his domestic life written specially by local author Alison Barnes and delivered by the Curator.
- 30 November **Christmas Tree Decoration Day** – 44 children and adults made decorations in the form of sparkly shoes.
- 10 December **Christmas Social Evening** for Museum Society with short talk by Julia Bazley on the planning and preparation of the *Shoe Show*
- 31 December **New Year's Eve afternoon party for volunteers**, including behind the scenes tours of the museum and school room buildings. A further 'thank you' event for volunteers and supporters is planned for May.

5.3 Outreach

Other Museums and Local Groups supported

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

- Great Dunmow Museum Society (Committee, Curator)
- Fry Art Gallery Society (Committee, Curator)
- Essex Biodiversity Action Plan Group (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Special Roadside Verges Project (Natural Sciences Officer)
- Uttlesford Nature Conservation Working (Natural Sciences Officer).
- Saffron Walden & District Searchers (3 evening meetings, Curator)
- Local History Recorders (meeting with UDC IT staff and website consultants)
- Heritage Sampford project (evening meeting with ECC archaeologists and information on selection and retention of archaeological finds, Curator)
- Saffron Walden Initiative (promotion at Local Business evening, 30 October)

In addition, there has been informal liaison with the continuing Littlebury Millennium Project.

Advice, support and involvement in organisations outside Uttlesford

Essex Museum Workers Group Committee (Curator)

Museums in Essex Committee – meeting at Saffron Walden (Curator), including visit to Bridge End Gardens project and Fry Art Gallery

EEMLAC – 2 meetings re. development of a regional museums forum (Curator)

South Midlands Museums Federation – Committee (Curator, Hon. Secretary)

MAGDA/Museums & Galleries Disability Association (Visitor Services)

Talks and Lectures given by Museum staff:

2 October Stansted Historical Society (Curator)

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

Supervisors training course for Natural Sciences Officer in February.

An increasing amount of staff time will be taken up with the Resource Centre project, and also with continuing work on the new website.

2 Buildings and Site

Asbestos to be removed from cupboard (Special Exhibitions Gallery) 19-20 January.

Team cleaning of stores and gallery areas in February.

New freezer for dead animal / plant specimens to be purchased.

3 Collections and Research

Research visits continue – plants and insects, local archaeology

Education Officer visits to the British Museum

Saturday 3rd April: Museum Ethnographers Group visit

4 Displays and Visitor Services

The next special exhibition opens on 31st January and will be *Tinctures and Tonics, Thaxted Pharmacy in Times Past*, based on the collection of John Murrison, a retired pharmacist, with supporting material from the Museum's collections.

5 Events, Education and Outreach

7 and 15 January Freezing Fun

13 March Science Week event.

An "Arts in Essex" grant of £1,500 has been awarded to the Museum by Essex County Council. This will be supplemented by an award of £300 from the local branch of N.A.D.F.A.S. and £300 from U.D.C., to fund art activities inspired by the next exhibition, *Tinctures and Tonics*. An artist, Kiran Chahal, has been engaged to work with family groups and young people during the run of the exhibition. Some activities will be held in a collaboration between the Museum and the North and West Essex Community Centre.

A programme of activities being prepared for Museums Month in May, possibly including 'Castle Rock' on Monday 31st May.