

### **The Heritage Quest Centre Project and Project Aims**

Developing access to collections and associated services, for the population of a large rural district, and the public at large – this is the essence of the Heritage Quest Centre project. Saffron Walden Museum, the district museum service for Uttlesford (north-west Essex), seeks to maximise the untapped potential of its extensive current and future collections according to identified needs and opportunities, and set a new benchmark for the delivery of museum services to a changing rural community in the twenty-first century. New roads, housing and Stansted Airport are all bringing challenges to this predominantly rural area, an historic landscape rich in sites of environmental, historical and archaeological interest. We aim to position the Museum Service to meet these challenges, by providing a 'sense of place' for new and older communities in the district, through collections which will reflect everything from the geological origins of the landscape, its wildlife and ecology to the long history of human settlement here from Stone Age to present-day communities.

Our **project aims**, around which we propose to build a three-year outreach programme, are:

1. Opening up access to the Museum's collections for all ages and a wide range of interests and offering formal and informal learning opportunities appropriate for our audiences
2. Promoting public awareness, enjoyment and knowledge of the natural, historical and archaeological heritage of Uttlesford district
3. Fostering a wider sense of local community identity in our heritage, in established and new local communities

Several years of studies and small pilot 'outreach experiments' have established the parameters for the project and market for activities, as described in later chapters of the Business Plan. In order to improve access and services to the public, the project begins by tackling the principle factors inhibiting museum staff from accessing collections and associated information, and delivering services more effectively: lack of suitable space for utilising the reserve collections, and lack of resources to build a computerised database of collections, for eventual on-line access as well as research, educational and collections management uses. Thus the project has both capital and revenue elements.

The capital element is the construction of the Heritage Quest Centre itself - a purpose-built building in Saffron Walden, to house and provide access to collections of archaeology, social history, geology and natural history relating to Uttlesford District. The Centre will complement, not duplicate, the Museum: it will not only offer people the chance to access reserve collections (that is, collections not on display at the Museum), but offer the chance to participate in activities at the Centre and learn how much more happens with museum collections than just putting objects in showcases.

The revenue element consists of a three-year outreach and collections programme, for which we envisage employing three project staff to work alongside the permanent museum team. The outreach programme begins by extending the Museum's educational service with new loan items, and planning for the opening of the Heritage Quest Centre, after which it will expand to take collections and activities out around the district, using a variety of venues and concentrating on parts of the district furthest from Saffron Walden. The main thrust of the collections programme will be to create computer database of some 50,000 objects and specimens, and move them to the Heritage Quest Centre, together with some other elements of the collections currently housed in cramped conditions in the Museum, but which would be more rationally located in the Heritage Quest Centre. After this the collections emphasis will gradually change to developing collections information to support outreach, servicing enquiries and access needs of the public, and putting

the database on-line. Some rationalisation of older collections and development of new collections is also envisaged. The outreach and collection programmes will be integrated and inform one another throughout, for instance the collections programme will be identifying objects and specimens suitable for handling and educational use, amongst other things.

At the end of the project, the aim is to have a wider audience for the Museum Service, increased access to the collections and service, with an established outreach programme and sustainable building (Heritage Quest Centre) which will be operable by the permanent museum staff team at current revenue levels (allowing for inflation). The Heritage Quest Centre Project is Stage I of a long-term two-stage Forward Plan for the Museum Service, so it will also enable future developments at the Museum itself and put the collections on a better footing for the renewal and extension of displays and educational services in the Museum when the time comes.

### **Public Heritage Benefits and the Project's Audiences**

The Heritage Quest Centre project has many potential audiences, primarily the 70,000 residents of Uttlesford district, but also visitors from the East of England and beyond. While remaining open to the diversity of potential users, the project will focus on three specific target audiences:

1. Young People (aged 16-29) in Uttlesford and the surrounding region
2. Family groups in Uttlesford and the surrounding region
3. Rural communities across Uttlesford, particularly parishes distant from Saffron Walden.

The project will also enhance and extend access for special interest groups and individual researchers (existing user groups). New communities (new housing at Dunmow and Takeley) will be among the family and rural communities targeted. Local groups which share specific aims and interests with the Museum Service are being involved in the project where possible, for instance the Uttlesford Local History recorders and Essex Wildlife Trust. There will be scope in the outreach programme to work with other local / parish organisations on individual events.

### **Collections**

Since Saffron Walden Museum opened in 1835, its long history of collecting has produced a range and depth of collections (estimated at 175,000 items minimum), unusual for a district museum located in a market town. The Museum holds collections of non-local origin (ethnography, ceramics & glass, Egyptology, some costume & textiles) but the focus of the project will be the geology, archaeology, local / social history and natural history of Uttlesford district (north-west Essex), totalling over 100,000 objects and specimens. The project will improve the extent, efficiency and quality of access to these collections, and allow the Museum to develop collections to meet audiences' needs. 50,000 of these objects and specimens need cataloguing on computer to facilitate retrieval of information, and generally enable effective use and management of the collections. The collections are described more fully in chapter 2 of this Business Plan, and in the Acquisition & Disposal Policy (Checklist 1 / Document 24). It should be noted however that the relocation of most local collections to the Heritage Quest centre will enable future improvements to be made for accessing other collections at the Museum (Stage II of the long-term Forward Plan).

As well as being a major heritage asset for Uttlesford, the local collections contain material of regional importance, such as the Gibson Flora (19<sup>th</sup> century herbaria) and Essex Red Crag fossil collections, and the large and high-quality archaeological archives accumulating from extensive excavations at Stansted Airport and its environs. The latter, coupled with archaeology from regular development and local community projects, will form one of the most extensive multi-period archaeological records for a historic, rural landscape in south-eastern Britain, and the Museum's plans to accommodate these archaeological archives and make them publicly accessible are supported by the county archaeologists, Essex County Council and by Colchester-Ipswich Museum for the East of England Hub (See Checklist 1 / Document 25, letters of support).

### **Strategy for Long-term Sustainability**

Saffron Walden Museum is operated by Uttlesford District Council, which supplies staff and revenue budgets. Financial pressures on rural district councils such as Uttlesford mean that once the Heritage Quest Project has run its course, the Museum Service must continue to operate on the same level of revenue budgets and permanent staffing that existed before the project. On completion of the Heritage Quest Centre, the Museum Service will be able to vacate an inadequate off-site store which it currently occupies at the Council's Contract Services depot, 3.5 miles out of Saffron Walden. Costs associated with the operation of the present off-site store will transfer to the Heritage Quest Centre, which will be a far better quality and more energy-efficient structure. The small overall increase in annual revenue costs anticipated by additional facilities in the Heritage Quest Centre will be offset by the opportunities it provides to generate a certain amount of income from some of its activities. Details are given in chapter 7.

### **Summary of Risk Management**

Financial risks have been minimised by raising as much matching funding as possible prior to the application to HLF at time of application, £200,000 out of £320,000 matching funding required have been raised, with applications for a further £120,000+ in progress: a breakdown of funds received and anticipated is provided in Chapter 7.

[other risks and their management to be added..]