



SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM

**Uttlesford District Council &
Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd**



DOCUMENTATION POLICY 2020-2025

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Name of museum: *Saffron Walden Museum*

Name of governing body:

Uttlesford District Council & Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Date on which this policy was approved by Museum Management Working Group for recommendation to Cabinet:

February 2020

Date on which this policy was approved by Cabinet of Uttlesford District Council:

April 2020

Policy review procedure:

The collections development policy will be published and reviewed from time to time, at least once every five years.

Date at which this policy is due for review:

July 2025

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Introduction and Purpose

- 1.1** The Documentation Policy describes how the Museum provides useful and usable information about the collections and their contexts, to the support the Museum Service's aim, which is

To give people inspiration and a sense of place in Uttlesford district / north-west Essex, through exploration of our wide-ranging collections and the histories they represent

In particular, the Documentation Policy describes the standards and initiatives needed to advance the key purpose of the Museum's 2020–25 Forward Plan:

To increase people's engagement with the Museum collections and the Museum and Castle site as a 'heritage hub' for North-West Essex and beyond, through development of the Museum building, displays, activities and site interpretation

in order to contribute to the Museum's long-term sustainability and development through increased use, income and public support.

- 1.2** The Documentation Policy describes how the Museum will

- Maintain accountability for its collections, including items on loan
- Follow the Spectrum primary documentation procedures, as set out in the Museum's documentation Manual
- Maintain the physical and digital security of all collections data, for the long-term
- Provide and develop access to the collections and associated data in appropriate ways to meet the needs of the Museum's users, in-house, local, regional, national and world-wide

- 1.3** During the last five years (2014-2019) care of the collections has been significantly improved by the provision of a new purpose-built off-site store and the transfer of about 70% of the collections to this facility, from other buildings formerly used for storage, as well as the Museum. Consequently resources (staff, volunteers, operating budgets) have been focused on packing and moving collections and setting up the new store. Latterly, attention has turned to auditing new storage locations and taking in the backlog of archaeological archives awaiting deposition, plus recent donations and bequests. It is now essential to focus on documentation and digitisation of the collections, in support of the following:

- Basic accountability and management for all collections
- Improve efficiency and effective use of staff time in dealing with research enquiries, collections management, displays and all collections-based activities

- Enable staff and volunteers to identify key exhibits and develop new narratives for redisplay of the Museum, and to develop the display briefs which will be required within the time-frame of this policy (2020-25) subject to the Forward Plan proceeding as anticipated
- Develop new audiences and increase the engagement of existing audiences, by making collections more readily available through digital channels
- As part of the Museum's development, helping to identify and introduce new income streams (e.g. learning and outreach, publications, shop merchandise) which will be facilitated by improved digital access to and imaging of collections

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Accountability

- 2.1** The Documentation Policy operates within the ethical and legal framework defined by the Museums Association *Code of Ethics*, General Data Protection Regulations and Freedom of Information, and any additional legislation relevant to the storage of data and information
- 2.2** Saffron Walden Museum records and maintains information that allows us to identify and locate all objects and specimens in our collections, including objects or specimens which are on loan to the Museum and objects which are loaned by the Museum to other venues
- 2.3** The Museum recognises its accountability for the collections and documentation to its community of stakeholders and users, including but not restricted to.
- Its governing authority Uttlesford District Council, which is responsible for operating the museum service, and Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd which is legal owner of the collections
 - Owners of items on loan to the Museum and borrowers of items loaned out by the Museum
 - All those engaged in work on the collections, whether as staff, volunteers, researchers, students, and other cultural, scientific and educational institutions
 - All those who enquire about or interact with the collections and stories they represent, whether in person or remotely through all forms of media including digital. The world cultures collection in particular has a potentially worldwide community of users from many cultures and first nations
- 2.4** The Museum's documentation procedures follow the appropriate Spectrum standards, as set out below, as far as possible. Where information is limited due to historical circumstances and cannot be retrieved (e.g. because information on older collections was not recorded at the time to modern standards, or was lost) the limitations of the available information will be stated and acknowledged.

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Standards and Procedures

- 3.1** The Museum strives towards best practice for collections documentation as set out in the Spectrum standard, and adopts the Spectrum primary documentation procedures in its Documentation Procedural Manual (2020-25), in order to maintain at least the minimum level of documentation for all objects and specimens for which the Museum is legally responsible:
- Object Entry
 - Acquisition and accessioning
 - Location and Movement Control
 - Inventory
 - Cataloguing
 - Object Exit
 - Loans In (borrowing objects)
 - Loans Out (lending objects)
 - Documentation planning
- 3.2** The Museum's Documentation Plan (2020-25) sets out the current state of documentation across the Museum's collection and a schedule of resources required to address historic backlogs in some areas, to bring all collections up to the Spectrum minimum standard, and other highly desirable improvements.
- 3.3** It is Museum policy to develop and maintain a computer database catalogue of all its collections using dedicated software which supports the Spectrum standard. Currently the Museum uses Modes Complete.
- 3.4** Due to the size and history of the collections and redirection of resources in recent years into the store move, backlogs exist in some collections (notably archaeology and geology) of objects and specimens currently uncatalogued on the computer database, although paper/card records and/or lists in other formats (e.g. Excel spreadsheets) exist for the majority of these. The Museum will pursue a policy of prioritising backlog collections to be digitised on Modes Complete to the minimum Spectrum inventory level, and identifying the additional resources necessary to achieve this.
- 3.5** Priorities for the Modes Complete database 2020-25 are summarised below, subject to external funding and / or volunteer support for some projects:
- 3.5.1 Archaeology
- update inventory of all site and project archives
 - update inventory of exhibits on display

- create more detailed catalogue record of Treasure Act acquisitions
- inventory of all small finds and archaeological objects, in tandem with transfer to new low-humidity store off-site (project with fixed-term contract funded by archaeological archive deposition grants)
- audit and improve documentation of all human remains (discrete project subject to funding and specialist support)

3.5.2 Geology

- Continuing work on documentation of geology displays and collections in store (seeking project funding), to include updating inventory of exhibits on display and digitisation

3.5.3 Natural History

- Acquisitions: Documentation and digitisation of new acquisitions and small natural sciences backlog
- Non-Flowering Plant collections: documentation on Modes
- Birds' Eggs and Insects: name collections - document species present in cabinet drawers or boxes
- Natural History Photographic Archive: continued documentation and digitisation of images relevant to Uttlesford

3.5.4 Social History

- Prints, watercolours and drawings, archival documents and photographs: documentation and digitisation
- Costume and Textiles: audit, documentation and digitisation with potential move to new storage area within the Museum

3.5.5 Coins

- Detailed catalogue records of key items required for new displays

3.5.6 Decorative Arts

- Ceramics store: documentation and digitisation

3.5.7 World Cultures

- Audit, documentation, digitisation of Cuming Museum loan

3.5.8 Handling and Education Collections (separate collection)

- Continue basic documentation on computer

The Museum maintains security of data and original by the following means:

- 4.1** Accession registers and associated historic registers and lists of collections are kept in fire-proof storage units in a secure area and access to the storage location is controlled by staff. Data safes are used at the Shirehill store for storage of documentation submitted on CDs and other digital media (e.g. images and reports from archaeological excavation archives).
- 4.2** Digital copies of registers are maintained to meet security and access needs. This minimises physical risks due to handling, permits multiple access at both the Museum and off-site store, and enables copies of entries to be provided for research. Digital copies have been made of all registers covering collections acquired 1832 – 1903, and transcriptions have been made on Excel spreadsheets for all registers from 1897 to date, to aid searching. The Spreadsheets will be updated annually with recent entries and in future options for digitising the sequence of 20th century registers will be explored. Existing microfilm copies of 19th and 20th century registers will be retained in secure storage off-site as an additional back-up copy.
- 4.3** Back-ups of all collections data held on computer, including the Modes Complete database and digital copies of registers, are automatically made daily by the Council's IT section. All data and programmes are held on servers at Uttlesford District Council and not on hard-drives in the Museum. Any future proposals to develop or change IT provision at the Museum will be made in consultation with the Council's IT section and take into account the necessity of maintaining secure backed-up of data.
- 4.4** The Museum must ensure that digital data will not become obsolete or inaccessible through software going out-of-date. For common programmes in daily use, migration to new software platforms is handled by the Council's IT section. The periodic review of the Documentation Policy provides an opportunity to consider whether the collections database software remains sufficient for the Museum's needs and supports Spectrum and Accreditation requirements. The Museum intends to continue using Modes Complete for the duration of this Policy, while keeping aware of developments in museum documentation. Archaeological contractors depositing archives with the Museum are required to deposit a digital copy with the Archaeological Data Service (ADS) to ensure general public access and long-term migration of data to new platforms as necessary (*Archaeological Archives in Essex - Guidelines for preparation and deposition*, Museum Essex 2015).
- 4.5** The Museums will work with the Council's IT section to plan future storage capacity for digital data on the collections. Improvements to digital records and

the need to invest in quality digital imaging will impact on the data storage capacity required.

- 4.6** Access to collections data on computer is restricted to Museum staff and specific collections volunteers who have access through the volunteers' log-in. Volunteers recruited for work on collections documentation and computers complete the Council's on-line module and questionnaire on data security, in addition to normal recruitment safeguards (references; interview; signed agreement, confidentiality agreement and privacy statement).. Log-in books are kept to record volunteers' computer sessions. Access to and ability to edit the Modes Complete database is subject to further password-controlled access.
- 4.7** All other paper documentation (e.g. catalogue cards, historical files) are kept in stores and curatorial offices which are locked when unstaffed, and access is permitted only under supervision of the relevant member of staff.

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Accessibility and Future Developments

- 5.1** Access to information on the collections is currently provided as follows:
- 5.1.1 In the Museum, through displays with labels, hand-lists and general narrative panels. A brief written introduction to the Museum and its collections is available in a range of languages for visitors from other countries and ethnic groups (analysis of visitor figures 2017-18 indicated that about 6% of visitors came from outside the UK)
 - 5.1.2 On-line, the Museum's website provided an overview of the collections. Information on *object of the month* is provided through social media and blogs which are accessible through the website.
 - 5.1.3 In local publications: articles about, or featuring, Museum collections regularly appear in local publications (e.g. general interest and local history journals), written either by Museum staff or by local researchers using the Museum's collections
 - 5.1.4 Outreach activities; workshops and lectures provided by staff on request or as part of the Museum's activity programme.
- 5.2** In 2020-25 we will develop access to collections information in accordance with the proposals set out in its Forward Plan, drawing on the Audience Development Study and Options Appraisal & Feasibility Study (Resilient Heritage project to be completed in 2020). The principle elements will be:
- 5.2.1 Produce a new revised short guide to the Museum and collections, to be available in printed form on the Museum and on-line from the Museum's website. Review the provision of a summary guide in other languages in

the light of the 2020 audience development study and commission new translations as appropriate.

- 5.2.2 Improve the range and quality of information on the Modes Complete database as set out in the Documentation Plan and summarised in 3.5 above for prioritised collections.
- 5.2.3 Improve the capture and quality of digital images of collections by setting up digitisation stations at the Museum and Shirehill store with appropriate photographic and scanning equipment (subject to resources, changes to use of space in the Museum and funding bids for the development project). It has been policy for some time to take record shots of new acquisitions as part of the cataloguing process, but the Museum now needs to invest in digital imaging to improve visual access for users, and develop access through the internet, publications, marketing and learning activities.
- 5.2.4 Training for staff and volunteers should be included as appropriate, to improve all-round digital photography skills, and links with local skilled photographers and organisations such as Saffron Walden Camera Club.
- 5.2.5 Explore the most cost-efficient way to offer on-line access to the Museum's collections. It is the Museum's intention to make its collections available on-line. This is being pursued with organisations such as the Collections Trust, in the context of sector-wide initiatives which may prove a better way of resourcing and achieving on-line searching..
- 5.2.6 As part of the Museum's redevelopment, develop plans for new galleries and outreach which will use digital media to enhance and extend users' engagement with the collections. Development of displays and briefs will consider the needs of different users for various levels and types and information, and preferred delivery methods (e.g. written, pictorial, spoken, in-person guided tours; digital devices or printed).
- 5.2.7 Advance our understanding of how digitisation and digital services will enable the Museum to engage future audience and improve its marketing. This requires opportunities for staff and volunteers to attend relevant museum sector meetings and obtain feedback from users of digital media (especially, though not exclusively, younger age groups) to keep abreast of developments in this field and achievable ways of implementing improvements.