



# Museum Matters

Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Spring 2015 Issue 35

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Dates of future Events - see Noticeboard enclosed

## Highlights and Happenings

### From the Chairman

Work on the new store has progressed. The contractors have completed the racking in the Natural History section.

Work continues with the remainder in the installation of racking in the other sections. Meanwhile training for the volunteers for the move took place in November/ December. Work on preparation for the move is well under way with the team of volunteers working with Museum staff. A formal opening of the store will take place when the move from Newport is complete, but this is unlikely to happen before the Society's Annual General Meeting which this year will be held on 31st July.

With the sale of 40 Castle Street complete and the move into the new store underway, the Board are now giving further consideration to the Phase II development. The Board has appointed a Development Committee to consider the options available to improve the Museum both for visitors and for all those working in the Museum.

With the proceeds from the sale of 40 Castle Street now in hand. we have a provisional budget.

The main event at the end of last year was the Christmas party held on 8th December. As a change from the quiz, we invited Alexandra Jones to entertain us with songs relevant to the season - you may recall that Alexandra sang at the opening of the Exhibition North West Essex at War in August. We welcomed over 80 Members and their guests to the Christmas Social evening, and those present joined in with hearty voice and made a good attempt to lift the roof of the Great Hall!

By the time you read this Newsletter, we will have had the first two monthly talks. There was a large audience for Chris South with his talk on 'Grunty Fen'. Unfortunately I shall be away for the talk by Member Douglas Kent in February, when Members will have the benefit of his long experience and involvement with ancient and historic buildings. Thankyou to Carol Law for the quality of the talks she arranges.

The Board has seen a change of officers as Andrew Penman has taken up the role of Treasurer from 1st January from David Laing who will, however, continue as Company Secretary for the remainder of his term on the Board.

David has filled the role as Treasurer since before the creation of the Society as a limited company and was largely responsible for the registrations at the Charity Commission and Companies House some years ago, for which very many thanks, David.

The Support Committee has completed the update of the Society's website (go to [www.swmuseumsoc.org.uk](http://www.swmuseumsoc.org.uk) to have a look): the Society is very grateful for all the work Tony Morton has done in preparing this revision. Tony has also succeeded in getting the Uttlesford website updated and this should go live very soon. The Administration Committee arranged a Privileged View on 13th February for Members and their guests of the new Exhibition *Visions of the World* which was attended by nearly 70 people.

You may have noticed that the Council have been making progress on the restoration of the castle. The work on the tower on the north west corner is now complete, and the removal of undergrowth at the rear has opened up the site substantially. This all helps to make the Museum more attractive to visitors.

**Tony Watson**

## Curator's Column

### A Moving Experience -

an Update on the New Store Project

The great project of packing and moving collections to our new store at Shirehill is now in full swing, with thanks to the dedicated team of volunteers who have signed up to help with this work. Sarah, Leah and I are taking it in turns to supervise the work at the old off-site store in Newport, as hundreds of boxes of specimens and objects, and scores of larger, unboxed items, are checked, dusted, listed, packed and labelled up ready for the Big Move.



Volunteer Peter Morrissey gets to grips with historic horse bones from a site in Great Chesterford

Volunteer Heather Salvidge and Museum casual assistant Suzanne Hawkins tackle the packing of human skeletal remains from the Anglo—Saxon manor site at Wicken Bonhunt. These require a special degree of care for ethical as well as archaeological reasons



Meanwhile at the new store on Shirehill, Saffron Walden, Stefan has been keeping a check on the environment inside the new building, adjusting the heating and measuring the temperature and relative humidity. This monitoring is essential to see if conditions will be stable and at the right levels for the collections, and where we will need to instal dehumidifiers to maintain the correct environment for more sensitive collections. Other Council departments are organising the installation of services such as phone lines and IT cabling. One huge benefit this will bring is the ability to use computers in all areas of the building, so that database entries and locations can be edited on the spot as we work on or check collections.

The Natural History store of the first floor has been fitted with racking but the rest of the first floor and the whole of the ground floor have yet to be racked. Back at the Museum, there has been much agonising over racking plans as Leah and I and the racking company try to find the best way of fitting our large and very varied collections of social history and archaeology into the space available.

As this newsletter goes to press. we are expecting to finalise the timetable for the installation of the rest of the racking imminently. At present it looks as though we should begin moving collections from Newport to Shirehill in May.

*Carolyn Wingfield*

## Off with his Head!

*Carolyn Wingfield*

If you have been following BBC TV's dramatisation of Wolf Hall recently, check out the magnificent Tudor oak Standing or Court Cupboard (displayed on the Museum's first floor landing) which has a very direct link with one of the historical characters featured.



The Tudor Cupboard originating from the Weston family

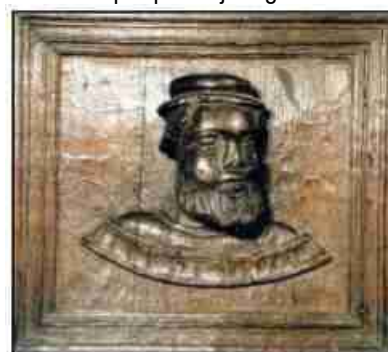
Francis Weston was among the group of unfortunate young noblemen beheaded in 1536 for alleged adultery with Queen Ann Boleyn, and the fictionalised TV drama included a brief but poignant scene between Francis Weston and Thomas Cromwell in the Tower of London.

Our cupboard came to the Museum in 2002 from a local donor but was originally owned by the Weston family, who lived at Sutton Place near Guildford. The centrepiece of the carved decoration is a barrel or 'tun', a reference to 'Weston' (West-tun) typical of the Tudor love of verbal and visual puns. The letters A W on either side of the tun may be the initials of Ann Weston, Francis' wife, and it has been conjectured that the cupboard was a wedding gift to her on their marriage.



The initials A—W either side of a 'tun' or barrel

On either side of the tun there are portrait busts carved in relief of a gentleman and lady, said to represent Francis and Ann, though it is not certain whether they were intended as portraits of individual people or just generic



Relief portrait of a Tudor gentleman, said to be Francis Weston

representations of a man and a woman. In either event, they are unusual and arresting features of the design. The cupboard was a high status item of furniture, used for storing and displaying best plate and tableware.



Relief portrait of a lady, said to be Ann Weston

## Museum Tales

### The Most Famous Ball In History *Jenny Gibsone*

In this year of many historical commemorations (including the 80th birthday of the Museum), one event above all others is represented by the presence of associated objects in the Museum collections - The Battle of Waterloo, which took place on Sunday, 18th June, 1815.

For the founders of the Museum (who were young men in 1815) and for their contemporaries across Europe, the victory over Napoleon was an event of incalculable importance. It created a 19th century world order dominated by Western European capitalism in which Britain was the major player. The effects of this conclusive victory can still be felt today.

Methods of making war in the early 19th century involved the close proximity of square formations of opposing infantry, reloading their muskets as fast as possible. Cavalry were deployed in sudden attacks and as defence. All were bombarded by batteries of cannon. 200,000 men, 60,000 horses and over 500 guns were crowded into a narrow area 2.5 miles long. By 9.30 pm on 18th June, the battlefield was a scene of appalling carnage. Casualties were greater in number than at any battle since, including the Somme. Later when British tourists began to roam the area in horse drawn carriages, it was easy to pick up military souvenirs from the canny locals. This is probably the source of some of the artefacts in the Museum collections.

The subject of this article does not come from the battlefield. Far from it! it is an early 19th century lace ballgown, handed down carefully as a relic, and donated to the Museum because it was said to have been worn at 'the most famous ball in history' held in Brussels on the night of 15th June by the Duchess of Richmond. Brussels was the headquarters of the Duke of Wellington, it was the most convenient location to meet up with the forces of the Prussian army under Marshal Blucher and wait for the French Army to march north. Officers brought their families over from Britain and all enjoyed a familiar round of social occasions in this new setting.



Napoleon and his army moved more swiftly than expected. His plan was to keep the British and Prussian armies apart, deal with the Prussians and then fall on the British. News of the first skirmishes arrived in Brussels at 3 pm on 15th June. The Prussians had withdrawn from a strategic bridge at Charleroi and the roads to the north were open to the French.

British officers commanding regiments at some distance from Brussels began to leave that afternoon, but the Duke of Wellington and many other officers attended the ball. Wellington was a cool customer who enjoyed the good things of life. Just before supper at 10 pm, news came of more fighting. Officers and commanders were individually given their orders and discreetly slipped away, one by one. The Duke himself continued to smile and converse for some time until he turned to his hostess and remarked "I think it is time for me to go to bed." By dawn, as the market traders of Brussels trundled their carts through the city gates, long streams of red coated infantry men were marching past them, heading out towards the battle zone.

The dress would be carefully packed away in anxious anticipation, perhaps, that it would be worn again at a victory celebration.



Bodice detail of the dress

## Article

### Community Archaeology: Mograt Island, Sudan *Gemma Tully*

Many of you will remember that last January I had the opportunity to travel to the Republic of Sudan to work on an excavation and community archaeology project with a team from Humboldt University, Berlin. Well, this year Uttlesford District Council and the Museum were kind enough to let me return and continue the work on the island of Mograt, some 400 km north of Khartoum.

This year I was involved with two different but interlinking aspects of the project. Most mornings I helped with the excavation and documentation of an Ottoman period mud-construction fortress. Three of the fort's defensive walls, along with part of two of its towers, remain today and stand over 2 metres high (see first image overleaf). The southern-most wall of the fort, which must once have been right next to the Nile, is now completely lost, probably due to the erosion and movement of the Nile with the annual inundation of the river.



Showing local schoolgirls the archaeology of the fortress

interestingly, other than a few pieces of pottery, no finds or internal walls were identified inside the fort. This suggests that the fort may have had only a very short life-span, at least with regard to its original purpose. Nonetheless, the fort continues to play an important part in the lives of people living in the local village of al-Hila.

From a playground for the young to wonderfully sheltered agricultural land for the growing of date palms and other crops, the fortress continues to be used today. Due to this contemporary link, we had many visitors of all ages during the excavation season who came to find out who we were, what we were doing and why. This local interest allowed me to expand the second part of my role in the project as the community archaeologist. This meant that I spent a significant amount of my time talking to local people about the excavation work of the project, as well as discussing their local histories, finds and stories concerning the island's past.

This also allowed me to get feedback on a small booklet about archaeology and modern life on Mograt, which I had compiled based on last year's consultations with various communities on the island. I also took the booklet into schools, as school-aged children are particularly keen to get involved with the project and to learn more about the history of their island (see image below). in exchange for picking their brains for ways to improve the booklet, i also gave English lessons and 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' is now certainly number one in the Mograt island music chart!



Some of the school children who helped with the booklet. Image taken inside their school courtyard

It was a fantastic experience and, if anything, more rewarding than last year as I already knew many of the people and was able to get more closely involved with island life (see following image).



My 'beautification' through the application of henna

I hope to take the completed booklet, in English and Arabic, back to Mograt to give to the schools and families next year (if the Museum can spare me one last time). The booklet will not only help with history education on a local scale, but it will also act as a material legacy of the collaborative work that has taken place between the archaeological team and the people of the island, which I hope has enhanced the quality of historical knowledge as well as cultural understanding for all those involved.

## Natural Sciences

*Sarah Kenyon*

The baby stick insects are getting bigger. They have been through two moults (shedding their skin) to grow larger. We can now see two different shapes of stick insect which should grow up to be male or female.



The baby slick insects

The autumn cut of the Special Roadside Verges started very late in January 2015, and it has been hard work trying to keep track of which sites have been cut, partially cut. or not cut at all. A big 'thank you' to the team of Verge Surveyors who have been sending me regular updates about the sites.

Packing of collections at the off-site store continues. We recently finished the Mollusc collection - 100 boxes containing about 10,000 shells - a momentous occasion for me and the volunteers.



Sarah with razor shells

We are now packing drawers and boxes of Geology which contain rocks, minerals or fossils - or all three types of collection together in a box!



Store team volunteers with shipworm shells and timber showing holes bored by shipworms. Shipworms are not worms — they are actually bivalve molluscs.

## Exhibitions

14th February-16th August *Visions of the World*  
29th August-7th February, 2016 *Uttlesford: A Community of Collectors*

### Human History Collections

**Leah Mellors**

The past three months have flown by in a blur - how can it be March already?!

I have been pushing forward with the packing of collections at the Newport store and I hope that all the packing and listing will be finished in this store by the end of the week (fingers crossed!). I am incredibly grateful to all the fantastic volunteers who have worked hard and continued to smile, even when I have presented them with the most awkward of objects to wrap! We will now be moving on to the Organics store and swapping mantraps, ploughs and Chisels for toys, wall paintings and furniture!



I took a two-week break from packing at the start of February to de-install North-West Essex at War and install our new Exhibition, *Visions of the World*. As many of you know, *Visions of the World* is a touring exhibition of beautiful photographs from the Royal Geographical Society, which we have complemented with objects



from our own world cultures collections. I enjoyed quizzing many Museum Society Members on their favourite image at the private view (if you haven't already, come along to the Exhibition and let me know your favourite).

*Visions of the World* will run until August 2015, when Gemma and I will install *Uttlesford: A Community of Collectors*. This Exhibition will showcase the collections of people in our community and it will be co-curated with the owners of the collections. Gemma and I are excited to start work on the Exhibition this week and we believe it has the potential to be one of our most engaging and visually-appealing exhibitions yet.

The human history collections team continues to grow and we have recruited another volunteer, Jill Knight, who will be assisting me with the documentation of our local history archive. Jill has started documenting our military collection and we have come across some fascinating telegrams dating from World War I.

Our team will soon be even bigger as I have secured funding from SHARE Museums East to pay for two new interns, who will start in April. The interns will be working closely with Carolyn and myself on a collections review project, with one intern focusing on the social history collections and the other on the archaeology collections. Not only will this provide much-needed assistance with the human history collections, it will also bring fresh ideas and perspectives into the Museum and offer me the opportunity to manage and mentor aspiring museum professionals.

## Museum Outreach News

**Gemma Tully**

Winter was pretty quiet in terms of events in the Museum. We had the annual Christmas tree decorating activity and families had the chance to make festive birds for their indoor trees as well as outdoor bird feeders.



Christmas decorating activities

As a special extra surprise, local children's author Ruth Hatfield popped along and read the opening chapter of her debut novel 'The Book of Storms', which went down really well with everyone from children to grandparents.

Much of my winter was occupied with planning the events for 2015. So what have you got to look forward to in the coming 12 months? In terms of exhibitions *Visions of the World* opened on 14th February and is a fantastic showcase of images from the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) taken by travellers, scientists and explorers. Leah was glad to have former Curator Len Pole's assistance in choosing relevant objects from the Museum's world cultures collection. Later in the year, we will have a community exhibition which will look at the collections of Uttlesford residents. It might also be a chance for Society Members to get involved and to share their collections with the museum-visiting public. Keep your eyes peeled for further information on getting involved, coming soon!

The events this year range from making mosaics and dinosaur feet to theatre performances and a living history day to mark the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. But before any of those things happen, February half-term will see us making fabulous finger puppets inspired by 'celebrities' from the Museum's collection, including Wallace the Lion and our Mummy. Images to come in the next edition.

Do pop-in and pick up a leaflet to make sure that you stay up-to-date with everything going on in the Museum. The information for 2015 is available at the welcome desk and online at [www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org](http://www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org)

## Museum Society News

### From the Treasurer

David Laing, who retired as Treasurer at the end of December last year, has been a solid Treasurer for the last ten years and his inexhaustible contribution is to be appreciated. Big shoes to fill, but I hope to continue to raise the profile of the Museum Society and fund our activities.

## Talks and Events

In the last few years, having become increasingly involved with the Museum, it has become clear to me that we must keep local awareness of our artefacts and not lose that which we have - and what we must continue to hold in trust for generations to come. I hope to carry on his good work and, while David will carry on as Company Secretary until the end of his term as a Director. I am sure he will look forward to a long and happy retirement.

On the day-to-day side, we continue to appreciate the steady performance of Charles Stanley, our long standing investment managers, who clearly appreciate the need to manage a stable portfolio in turbulent economic times. Even as an incumbent, I do not mind commending their prudent performance. That said, it is not for the Society merely to accumulate funds and, if artefacts with local interest become available, we should continue to acquire them. With the new space at Shire Hill, such artefacts should be more widely accessible and, while it is not directly involved with my role as Treasurer of the Society, I will be taking a great interest in the hopefully increased footfall.

Membership and subscriptions remain a concern, and I will perhaps address this in more detail in my summer report. Overall, our membership is principally mature or mature plus! - and sadly more Members die than are born. However, on that front, we greatly appreciate the bequest from the estate of the late Joan Watson, whom many will remember as a volunteer at the Museum and whose kind legacy will help the Society's good works.

**Andrew Penman**

### Membership

Membership renewal time is approaching and many of you will have heard from me already. Please try to pay promptly thus saving the time and expense of reminders. It would be wonderful if none were needed!

Last year a number of members, who had not previously done so, signed Gift Aid declarations and the Treasurer was able to claim tax refunds from HM Revenue & Customs for up to four years. This is a great help with the Museum Society finances. If you pay UK income tax or capital gains tax and have not already made a declaration, please consider doing so this year. A form for this purpose was included with your mailing. If you would like more information, please contact either Andrew Penman or myself.

The Special Membership Offer is still open. Anyone joining the Museum Society in March 2015 will have the rest of the month free as a renewal subscription will not be required until [5] April, 2016. I will be delighted to send details by post or email to anyone who is interested in becoming a member. My contact details are: telephone 01799 527546 or email: s.christinesharpe@hotmail.co.uk. All new members receive a Welcome Pack.

**Christine Sharpe**

**12th January**

**Grunty Fen - the hilarious history of how Grunty Fen came to Little Chesterford!**

**Speaker: Christopher South**

Christopher South who lives in Little Chesterford, was a columnist and news editor for the Cambridge Evening News, and is still a presenter for BBC Radio Cambridgeshire. However, for the past seventeen years, he has been writing radio comedy scripts set in Grunty Fen with long time friend, the singer/song writer Pete Sayers. Chris noted that he and Pete were very different characters but there was never a cross word between them and they spent many hours together, laughing hilariously at their own jokes as they put together their Grunty Fen radio programmes.

Chris has recently published 'The Authorised Guide to Grunty Fen - Gateway to the East' (available from the Tourist Information Office) as a tribute to Pete Sayers who died some years ago. It was Pete who developed the character of Dennis of Grunty Fen, a world set out in the Fens that has become a real place in the minds of many listeners the world over. Many have tuned in regularly over the years and have become avid fans. Chris pointed out that Grunty Fen will never rank with Florence, Paris, Rome or even Diss as a cultural or historical venue, but it is true to say that there is nowhere else on earth like it!

Christopher then went on to tell us more about everyday life in Grunty Fen and some of its more memorable characters. Listening to Chris, who told us that the folk of Grunty Fen do not go out of their way to charm strangers and hold fast to their rather bizarre traditions, what made the audience laugh uproariously was the way Grunty Fen folk took on board 'new technology'. Apparently the pencil sharpener arrived a full ten years before the pencil, while the tea cosy arrived twenty years before the teapot and was widely believed to be some sort of contraceptive device!

In the Grunty Fen radio programme, Chris becomes Mr. South, really himself as the sophisticated townie from Saffron Walden, who looked down his nose at these uncouth characters who live out in the Fens. It always ends up at the end of each radio programme that the uncouth Fen characters come out on top with Mr. South looking rather foolish. Chris reminded us that some of the Grunty Fen characters arose from his encounters with various people he had met when he was a teenage reporter in Saffron Walden! The most memorable Grunty Fen character is Dennis. He was brought to life by Pete Sayers who originally dressed up as a disreputable, dirty fen man to irritate his neighbour. Dennis becomes the Verger at St. Judas who still lives in a converted railway carriage with his 92 year-old grandmother.

The most hilarious part of the talk was when Chris told the audience about the attacks by the so-called Feral Nuns. It seems that the nuns (more correctly known as the 'Little

Sisters of Perpetual Availability' - an order of sisters excommunicated by the Pope in the Middle Ages) who retreated to the wilds of Grunty Fen and led a nomadic existence, raided small settlements of eel trappers. They were said to have kidnapped a lone bus driver who was found ten years later appearing in a freak show at Great Yarmouth as 'The Amazing Quivering Man'. Reports abound of marauding nuns on fleets of Vespa motor scooters and male visitors to Grunty Fen are warned to avoid going out alone after dark!

All of his talk was vastly entertaining with hoots of laughter from the audience. The best way to find out more about the characters and the goings-on in Grunty Fen is to read Chris's newly published Guide to Grunty Fen - it will make you laugh out loud.

**Carol Law**

**9th February**

**Our Local Heritage and Ancient Buildings**

**Speaker: Douglas Kent**

Douglas Kent is a Chartered Surveyor and Technical & Research Director of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB): he lives in Saffron Walden at 25/27 Church Street. The SPAB is the UK's largest, oldest and most technically expert charity which campaigns to save old buildings from unnecessary damage, decay and demolition - which, considering Saffron Walden has the highest concentration of pre-1700 listed buildings in England, is jolly good news for S.W.

The SPAB was founded in 1877 by William Morris and other like-minded designers, architects and craftsmen.

Horrified by the great Victorian drive to 'restore' many old medieval buildings - over 7,000 churches had had the treatment between 1840-70 - Morris acted. The manifesto promoted 'conservative repair' - staving off decay by daily care. New work should complement the old and not parody it. People should use compatible methods and materials; in short, people should be doing as little as possible but as much as necessary.

To show what Morris and his friends were up against, Douglas showed us two photographs of the west front of St. Albans Cathedral before and after 'restoration' by Lord Grimthorpe: you can find them by searching for the SPAB on the internet and following links. By now the SPAB is enshrined in planning law as a statutory consultee for work involving pre-1714 buildings (after this date the Georgian Society and the Victorian Society have a role). Today the SPAB is there to advise, educate, campaign and train. It is funded by some grants but otherwise by voluntary contributions.

Douglas explained that Walden's wealth and subsequent collection of old buildings was founded on successive and successful trade in wool, saffron and malting. It is in a special area known as The Hundred Parishes which covers towns and villages in an area of north east Hertfordshire and north west Uttlesford, all set in gently rolling countryside. In Walden itself though, parts of the town were subject to decay, for example in Castle Street.

Douglas had a photo of no. 91 taken in 1955, half dismembered. The SPAB had alas been called in too late to offer a rescue plan -

from the photo it looked as though it could have been 15th or early 16th century.

Douglas 'took us round' the central part of town with illustrations of pre-1700 buildings showing us how, over the centuries, they had been 'modernised' - chimneys put in, sanitation(!), had had an extra floor put in half way up the hall of two-bay hall houses, had been extended, had been divided for multiple occupancy and undergone a change of use. Basically, then as today, people couldn't leave a building alone for more than about 10 years.

Then he turned to his current personal work, carrying out 'conservative repair' to numbers 25/27 Church Street which is part of the old Sun Inn. This is late 14th century and was constructed as part of the layout of the old '12-perch system'. By now it has acquired Grade 1 16th century pargetting, Victorian windows, an outdoor privy and a 19th century range.

By the 1930s an appeal was launched to buy it. The Gibson family contributed generously and the freehold was vested in the National Trust, but held for them by the Ancient Buildings Trust (ABT), now defunct. The current project for 25/27 picked up where the ABT left off, 50 years ago. Paint samples and wallpaper sections have been taken for analysis and the source of the imitation mosaic pattern has been traced to 'Keats House'. It is absolutely amazing what modern science can tell us about a building from a single scrape of paint! As Douglas says, these buildings are not just ours: they were our forefathers' and will belong to our descendants.

**Heather Salvidge**

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**Who to contact. . .**

**Museum Society**

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**Museum**

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Leah Mellors, Collections (Human History)
Stefan Shambrook, Security
Gemma Tully, Visitor Services & Learning Officer

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