



Museum Matters

Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Winter 2024 Issue 64

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Highlights and Happenings: From the Chairman

By way of a change I thought you would allow me to express some thoughts of how the summer has progressed into autumn. Our Museum like the rest of the World has to change and sometime it turns out for the better. We are now able to see the benefits of a decision made a year ago to support and fund the development and implementation of a digital strategy. In plain language we funded the Museum to develop and launch a new website.

The result is the overall traffic to our website has increased significantly with more Facebook and Instagram visitors and a growth in the number receiving the Museum's monthly email. At the same time numbers reading the online Museum News has increased.

Our physical visitor numbers whether to the Museum or through our Outreach programs has further increased. So our smaller staff team with all their bounce and energy are ensuring we are growing.

I regret to end on a sad note but after 25 years of dedicated service as our Natural Sciences Officer Sarah Kenyon is taking a well-earned retirement and heading back home 'up north'. Thank you for all the fine work.

Curator's Column: Jenny Oxley

I recently presented the Curator's Report at the Museum Society AGM. Here's a summary of the report's key areas.

Despite the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Museum, coupled with significant staff changes and redundancies over the last year, the Museum team have remained focussed and energised, delivering creative and imaginative exhibitions, events and activities, and achieving continuous improvement on all fronts. In terms of visitor numbers, in the 2023/2024 financial period we had total in-person visits on-site of 12,081 people (compared with 8,439 people in 22/23), with a total user figure of 14,513 people (compared with 11,790 people in 22/23). The total user figure includes outreach work such as visits to schools and loans boxes, but not our online reach and engagement.

Museum Development

The governance crisis has led to the postponement of the Museum Development project, which had been in planning for a number of years now with the intention of applying for major funding to re-display the entire Museum, creating a new learning space and much improved facilities. We hope these plans will move forward again with gusto once the governance issues have been resolved. In the meantime, the team are continuing to work on making continuous improvements on a smaller scale.

Staffing

I have been acting as Interim Curator since October 2023, when Carolyn Wingfield retired after 23 years. The Blueprint Uttlesford Project and Museum service review instituted by Uttlesford District Council, who manage the Museum day-to-day, resulted in budget cuts which necessitated a number of redundancies: the roles of Saturday Assistant, Security & Premises Officer, and Administrative & Front of House Officer. Subsequently, we recruited a Collections Assistant to provide partial backfill cover for the Collections Officer post and after the restructuring, recruited to a newly created role of Museum Support Officer.

Sarah Kenyon, Natural Sciences Officer retired from the Council on ill-health grounds in July 2024 after 24 years working in the Museum. Jill Knight resigned as Visitor Services Assistant and has been replaced by new starter, Amy Judd, who has previously worked at Wimpole Hall (National Trust), Royston Museum and Flag Fen. Huge thank you to all the volunteers who have supported us this year. Our total volunteer hours for the 23/24 financial year were 2,530 hours. We celebrated our volunteers with a tea party, as part of celebrating the National Volunteer Week in June. We've been busy recruiting additional volunteers and held 2 corporate volunteering day, for gardening and then decorating, with support from UCAN (Uttlesford Community Action Network, an initiative we plan to repeat again over the Winter. We've also had a request from Saffron Walden Building Society to host one of their upcoming corporate volunteering days as well.

Behind the Scenes & Facilities Management

Over the past year, lots of work has been done to review the Museum and fix a lot of maintenance issues, including boiler repairs, asbestos removal, burglar alarm upgrades and a new staff kitchen. We've been streamlining our IT files. We updated our risk assessments and did work on COSHH (care of substances hazardous to health) producing assessments for all the chemicals we store on-site. Positive Waste Solutions, an external contractor, came in and removed old items for disposal including old conservation chemicals, old fluorescent tubes, old heaters, and dehumidifiers. We brought the schoolroom back into use as a space for school visits.

Collections

The team achieved full Arts Council Museum Accreditation in July. Behind the Scenes the team has done significant work on managing the hazards in the collections associated with asbestos, radiation, controlled drugs and antique firearms. Staff moved the Museum's antique firearms from a ground floor store to a more secure store location behind the scenes to improve collections care and security. This work was done after on-site consultation with Essex Police and the National Firearms Centre, Royal Armouries, Leeds.

Our collections now total around 175,000 items, so we now limit the items acquired carefully just to items of Saffron Walden and Uttlesford district provenance, which fit within our collecting policy.

Exhibitions

The temporary exhibition programme this year has included;

Evacuee: A Wartime Childhood (Sat 11 Nov 2023 - Sun 17 Mar 2024)

Original artwork by the artist and author Brian Sanders was exhibited. His career has spanned decades working on books, magazines, stamp and coin designs, editorial and advertising projects. High profile work such as Mad Men and Stanley Kubrick, appeared in the exhibition.

Plants: The Struggle for Survival (Sat 30 Mar - Sun 7 July 2024)

The Museum displayed plant specimens from the historic herbarium collection that G.S. Gibson used to produce the first Flora of Essex, alongside colourful photographs taken by Barry Kaufmann-Wright, social history objects, ancient fossils, taxidermied birds and mammals, and live plants. This exhibition explored the relationship with plants that heal or harm, feed us or frustrate us, and uncover secrets of their survival over hundreds of millions of years from fossil fronds to Victorian collectors and modern roadside verges.

Soggy Sandwiches: Tales of British Summer (Sat 20 Jul - Sun 13 Oct 2024)

This exhibition explored the evolution of the British Summer holiday from promenading Victorians to the Swinging Sixties and beyond. From suits to swimsuits, trains to planes, soggy sandwiches to instant BBQs.

In addition, we have also delivered monthly Object of the Month displays, plus themed temporary displays through the year, in the Curiosity Corner and Your Stories (Community Showcase) display areas.

Additional interactive elements were added to the 'permanent' displays including the Mammoth hugs display and the Roman dressing up, both in the archaeology gallery / Great Hall, and the new digital microscope in the Discovery Centre.

Decolonising collections & Greater in Spirit, Large in Outlook Project

In 2023, our Arts Council funded joint project with Epping Forest District Museum (EFDM) entered the final stage as the project exhibition ran in Epping, with significant community input and engagement. Items from Saffron Walden Museum's world cultures collections went out on loan for this community curated exhibition. We continue to liaise with diaspora and source community groups regarding research and interpretation of the Museum's world cultures collections. Projects and initiatives in this area during this period included: Legacies of Colonialism in Museums discussion group (Social History Curators group network); Indigenous Knowledges Project (AHRC & York University); Wedge collection web resource project (University of Tasmania); Association on American Indian Affairs International Repatriation Strategy and work with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Conservation and Collection Audits

Senior Curator, Mark Murray-Flutter from the National Firearms Centre, at the Royal Armouries in Leeds, assisted us with an audit of our antique firearms collections. We also had a review visit from Essex Police and renewed our Firearms licence with the Home Office. In-house documentation projects undertaken with volunteers, have focussed during this period on the historic bird's eggs collections, costume and textile collections and the world cultures collections.

Digital Environmental Monitoring

Wi-fi-enabled data-loggers that were purchased by SWMS have been installed at Shire Hill to replace the mechanical THGs to measure temperature and relative humidity (RH) in the natural sciences store and the ground floor store. The archaeological metals store is also being monitored to ensure that sufficiently low RH is maintained there. The mechanical THGs that were in use can now be moved to the Museum and be used to establish a baseline for current environmental conditions in key gallery areas.

Distributed System of Scientific Collections (DiSSCo) UK

A 10-year, £155 million pound programme is due to start 2026-27 as part of the UK Research & Innovation fund with a business case owned by NHM and AHRC. The goal is to digitally unify European natural sciences collections under common curation & access policies & practice. In August, the Natural Sciences Officer reviewed the natural sciences collections to estimate the number of specimens within the scope of the project, resulting in a revised estimate of 77,755.

MDSE Access Audit & Improvements

The Museum has been successful in gaining a grant of £2,000 from Museum Development South East, for a professional access audit and follow-up improvement works in the Museum beginning in November 2024.

MDSE Income Generation

The Museum has been successful in gaining a grant of £500 from Museum Development South East, to use the Museum's printing press as the basis of workshops and creating bespoke products for sale in the Museum shop beginning in the winter of 2024.

On-site Events

Themed events complimented each of the temporary exhibitions in the school holidays and the site played host to a range of other events including bespoke printing workshops, archaeological finds surgeries, Museums at Night, Heritage Open Day, Thaxted Festival Family Concert, Private Hire: Child's Bouncy Castle Birthday party, Foodbank event and Fete de la Musique

We have been taking part in the "Threads of Time" Museum passport scheme in association with Museums Essex since the school Summer holidays.

We were one of 50 Museums in the UK participating in the Totally Chaotic History Museum Trail in October half-term, from Kids in Museums and Walker Books, who have published it to celebrate the release of historian Greg Jenner's new book, Totally Chaotic History: Roman Britain Gets Rowdy.

Off-site Events and community engagement

The team was one of the community partners who delivered the Jack & the Beanstalk themed children's event in October 2024 half term hosted by Saffron Walden Town Council, attended by over 250 people at Saffron Walden Town Hall. The Museum team were run off their feet during the day helping the kids make giant's ears and their own coats of arms/heralds to take home.

Other off-site events included the Festival of Geology in London, Gardens of Easton Lodge WW2 event, Debden Fete, "Here be Giants," Tudor themed installation at the Old Sun Inn, Community Archaeology Dig, Great Chesterford Local History Society and Saffron Walden Baptist Church 250th anniversary.

There's been an increase in learning income due in part to us now using the schoolroom building more, which has enabled us to welcome larger school groups. We've moved away from creating new activity packs, which were hugely popular in Covid times, but we continue to have a lot of user engagement on loan boxes from local schools. Demand for in-house school visits is now bigger than outreach to schools. Schools appear to be more confident and able to visit in person again now.

Marketing & Online

The updated Museum website continues to be well received, and we have seen growth in engagement on our social media platforms. We maintain our X profile as it holds our highest follower count, but due to social media trends this count no longer equates to a high level of engagement. So we are moving away from this platform in favour of Facebook and Instagram where we get greater reach and engagement and conversion to visits and event booking. For school holiday activities and larger scale events in the Museum, we are now regularly using Facebook paid advertising (boosting posts), as it is proving better value for money than paying for print advertising now.

We had a mystery shop as part of the Visitor Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS), which scored the Museum at 80%, up on the Museum's previous score, 3 years ago. They praised the Welcome Desk volunteer on duty and the Museum's re-designed website for its layout, usability, and search engine optimisation (SEO).

We are undertaking a new visitor survey in the Museum to inform our improvement work. We also intend to map the Museum's engagement over the last year in the town, district and beyond.

Natural Sciences: James Lumbard

Museum gardening

There has been a flush of produce and colour from the flowerbeds in late summer and even into autumn. Sunflowers and marigolds were the first to bloom, bringing bursts of colour to brighten the somewhat grey and damp summer. The French beans came next with their creamy yellow flowers and gave a long-lasting harvest through September and into October. The cosmos have come into their own in November and are bursting from the beds with their frothy foliage and pops of delicate pink. We also welcome Bridget, our new garden volunteer who has already made a fantastic start tidying the flower beds ready for the winter – thank you!



Climate and Ecology Hub

A new climate and ecology information hub is taking shape in the Discovery Centre gallery to help us understand background information on climate dynamics, compare our modern situation with periods in the deep past and understand how changes today can affect the global atmosphere and climate. We will be shining the spotlight on Uttlesford's local community organisations doing their bit for wildlife and the climate, and sharing how you can join them, as well as listing recycling resources around the district and sharing tips on how you can make get closer to nature where you live.

Christmas critters

The robin is the stereotypical Christmas critter but there is more going on in fields and gardens than many people realise. Enter the fieldfare, *Turdus pilaris*, a relative of the blackbird. They visit the UK in winter, migrating south from Scandinavia, to feast on berries in hedgerows and gardens – particularly rowan and hawthorn.

The tradition of Christmas trees was made popular in Britain by the royal family as Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, wife of George III, continued the Germanic tradition of bringing an evergreen tree indoors. This was most commonly a yew tree, or a branch from one. Older associations of yew include representations of life and death as they are particularly long-lived, and older branches which droop to the ground will root and grow again from that point.



Collections Officer, Human History: Simon Hilton-Smith

It has been a busy season in Human History. Setting up new exhibitions and removing old ones takes considerable time and requires teamwork, making this an exhausting week. Fortunately, our team has made the work feel much lighter. With "We Choose to Go to the Moon" now on display, it's time to start planning next year's exhibitions, developing ideas, and embarking on ongoing research.

While we have plenty of exhibitions, the human history section consistently attracts a steady flow of inquiries and visiting researchers. Our vast and diverse collections draw people worldwide, featuring items ranging from lacebarks to boomerangs and Anglo-Saxon kings to sixteenth-century Essex trade tokens. Our lacebark items were recently showcased in a new exhibition at the University of Bonn titled "Enmeshed and Enshrined." This exhibition focuses on shared stories expressed through textiles, highlighting the narrative of slavery from various parts of the world. It is groundbreaking, primarily due to its incorporation of virtual exhibitions and augmented reality, which open new possibilities for combining and exploring Museum collections.



Lacebark Cloak

While the lacebark may have been on a virtual holiday, several objects from our world cultures collection are currently on display in distant locations. Our mummified cat and some Mayan stone carvings are part of the Lenora Carrington exhibition "Avatars and Alliances" at Colchester's Firstsite gallery. Additionally, several of our gourds from Africa and Melanesia, which were once used to hold lime and snuff, are featured in the exhibition "Power Plants: Intoxicants, Stimulants, and Narcotics" at the Sainsbury Centre in Norwich.



It's not only objects leaving but also people coming in that keep us busy. Recently, we welcomed researchers interested in viewing our magical Anglo-Saxon objects and sharing the wonders of our collection with a broader audience on social media. Trade tokens were a favourite of one researcher, who discovered much more than he had expected to assist him with his book on the subject.

Anglo Saxon Hammer. It was an amulet worn around the neck to ward off evil and promote strength and power.

Knapped flint tools attracted not only a local historian but also a group of visitors from Germany, who made a special stop between their outings to Flag Fen and Grimes Graves. I even took flint knapping lessons to enable me to talk and write with a greater understanding of the material and the creative process.

Dr Tracey Black (UCL) continues her work by volunteering to audit the Ethnographic Collection, which is one of the real stars of the Museum. Her work is indispensable, as she ensures everything is in its place and opens up discussions about how we could redisplay and reinterpret the collection in an ever-changing world. We also have a new marvellous social media volunteer, Sam Hoyle, who is helping to develop and produce new content for our various channels. We have a planned series of podcasts discussing the Museum, its upcoming birthday, and its collections.



Knapped Flint Arrowhead

As the year draws to a close and Dionysus asks us to raise a glass to Saturn, our minds turn to the wonders ahead. Researchers from the USA, France, and Tahiti are already inquiring about visits, and our upcoming 190th birthday exhibition gives me plenty to focus on. I anticipate an exciting and fulfilling year full of discovery and wonder.

Object of the Month

August 2024

A selection of 18th century ladies' shoes from the Museum's collections.



Despite not being a particularly lucrative trade for shoe binders, closers and finishers to work in, shoemaking flourished in the 18th century. Many 18th and 19th century shoes were made on straight lasts, rather than separately crafted left and right lasts, the shoes just moulded to the foot, creating a left and right side over time! Hence the importance of breaking in a new pair of shoes or boots! By 1750, shoes began to be regularly made in different sizes, before that, they only made shoes of non-standard sizes on special order.

Throughout most of the 18th century, fashionable well off ladies wore shoes constructed with patterned fabric, which was

often brocaded or embroidered. Indian inspired floral designs were particularly popular. On embroidered examples, where the stitches have worn away you can often make out where the design was originally marked on the fabric in pencil.

Women's shoes of this period typically had a slender 'Italian' style heel, with a wedge under the instep. Women started to choose shoes with pointed toes, and there were even more elaborate pointed toe styles called hooked, where the pointed toe curled upwards.

The shoes were typically made with silk uppers, decorated with silver gilt thread detailing. Some examples of this period were decorated with green sequins made from iridescent beetles' wings, which caught the light and sparkled.

Buckled shoes grew in popularity by the mid-18th century. The ornate buckles were often made separately so they could be changed to match the wearer's outfit.



September 2024

Traditional Quaker bonnet.

The Religious Society of Friends, whose members were known as Quakers, was founded in 1652 by George Fox.

Quakers have been meeting in Saffron Walden on the same site, since 1676. Originally in a single back room behind 3 cottages on Cucking Stool End Street (now known as the High Street). The cottages were later combined, a grander entrance created, and a much bigger meeting hall created. The Meeting House was extended in 1791 and extensively rebuilt in 1879 to accommodate pupils from the Friends' School.

Magistrates had initially persecuted the Quakers, heavily fining them for meeting openly. On at least 2 occasions Magistrates ordered the Saffron Walden Meeting House doors to be nailed shut.



Prominent 18th and 19th century Quaker families in Saffron Walden included the Gibsons, the Frys, the Tukes, the Wyatts, and the Day Green family. They shaped much of the town's major development.

George Stacey Gibson, known as 'Mr Saffron Walden,' was a Quaker banker and eminent business man and philanthropist.

Born in Saffron Walden in 1818, he became Mayor and was responsible for building the railway branch line from Saffron Walden to Audley End and purchased the drinking fountain for the Market Square. He was integral in the building of the Corn Exchange (now Saffron Walden Library), Barclays Bank and the mock Tudor extension to the Town Hall.

October 2024

Fibres and seeds from a cotton tree seed pod - It's not Cotton!



This item was shown in our Plants exhibition from March to July and described as cotton. This was a mistake!

Reading the label on the box correctly, it says the cotton tree, *Bombax ceiba*. True cotton comes from the seed pods of a shrub. All four species that are grown for commercial use are in the genus *Gossypium*. But even that isn't the whole story.



When is a cotton tree not a cotton tree?



The label also claims that the tree is native to 'West India' – the Caribbean. However, *Bombax ceiba* is actually native to Asia. Searching online, other common names for this species include 'silk-cotton' and 'kapok' which are also used for the tree species *Ceiba pentandra*.

C.pentandra is found in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America and northern South America. In the English-speaking world, this tree is most commonly – and confusingly – called kapok, which is derived from the Malay language spoken in Southeast Asia where it referred to *Bombax ceiba*, which is native there.

As well as referring to the tree, kapok is also the name of the fibre released from its fruit. The husks of mature seed pods dry out and fall off, revealing kapok-covered seeds which are picked up and dispersed by the wind. The kapok fibre is difficult to spin and use for cloth but has been used as insulation or stuffing for cushions and furnishings.

Cotton trees in culture

C. pentandra and other species of ceiba tree play important roles in indigenous culture and beliefs in the Americas. It has a sacred position in the religions of African diaspora in the Caribbean including Palo and Santería. In Santería, the kapok tree has connections to the Orishas (divine spirits) and is the subject of offerings and rituals. Other species of *Ceiba* are central to the mythologies of the Indigenous people of Central and South America. In historic Mayan civilization, it represented the world tree connecting the Underworld, the land and the Heavens. Today's Maya, often leave ceiba trees standing out of respect when harvesting forest timber



November 2024

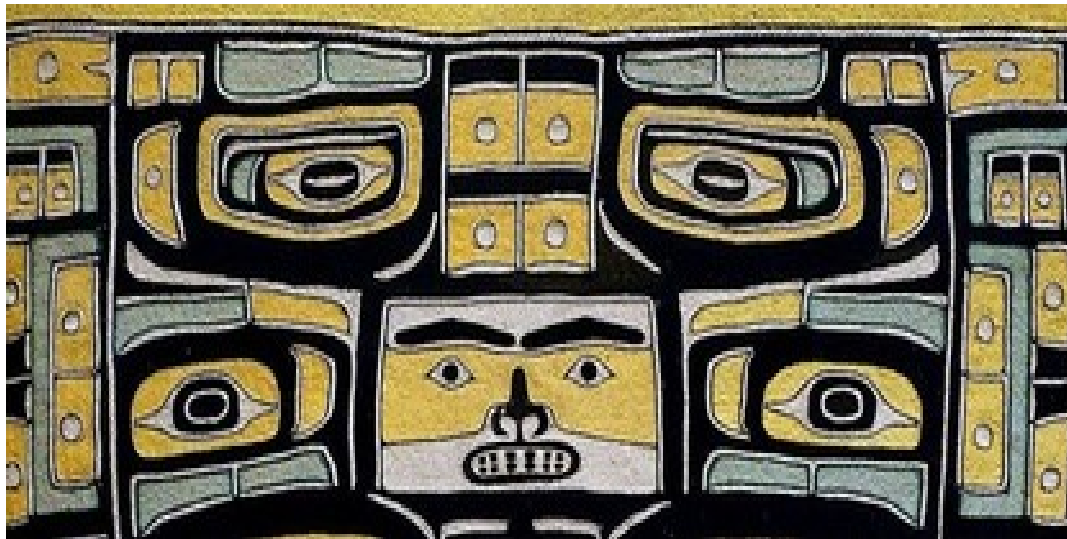
Tlingit Hat from the Pacific North West Coast of America



This Tlingit hat from the late 17 to early 1800s, is a testament to the exquisite headwear of the peoples of the Northwest Pacific coast and came into the Museums collection in 1836. The hat's conical shape, flattened top, and intricate decorations adorning its upper half invite a closer look. As a symbol of indigenous craftsmanship this hat plays a crucial role in preserving the culture of the Tlingit people

This hat showcases the creativity of a people who developed a distinctive style of decoration known as formline. Formline decoration is a method of reimagining the three-dimensional onto a two-dimensional plane. Limbs, appendages and orifices are rearranged and then re-wrapped into a three-dimensional form, as seen on blankets, boxes and hats.

Hats such as this had cultural and social significance, worn during potlatches, extravagant gatherings focused on showcasing wealth through celebration and generosity, served as a visible symbol of the wearer's status and clan allegiance.



Ceremonial cape, Tlingit people, Chilkat clan, northwest coast of North America, 1850-1900 AD, cedar bark, mountain goat hair, sheep's wool, view 2 - Textile Museum, George Washington University.



Frank H. Nowell "Tlingit man and woman in full dancing costumes, Alaska" University of Washington Libraries. Digital Collections <http://content.lib.washington.edu/>.

Crafted from woven spruce root, the hat is the product of a gender-based division of labour. Weaving, whether it's baskets, cloth, or hats, has typically been the domain of women. Decoration in formline, (a Northwest Coast Indigenous artform with distinctive curvilinear shapes called ovoids, U forms and S forms), has been primarily undertaken by men. Each aspect of this artistry demonstrates remarkable skill and talent. The hat's form, shape, texture, and pattern highlight the weaver's and decorator's expertise and the hat's significance. The hat symbolises the union of two halves, reflecting a fundamental principle of the Tlingit: the balance of the natural and supernatural, humanity and nature.

In 1885, the Canadian government banned the potlatch, a celebration for which many delicate objects were created. This ban was an attempt to Christianise and gain greater control over the people of the Northwest Coast. Children were separated from their families and sent to English language schools; indigenous languages and dialects were banned as the government strived to destroy the traditional ways of the various peoples of the coast. Many cultural treasures were destroyed, stolen or sold off to Museums worldwide. This practice continued until 1951. Despite this, the people of the Northwest Coast clung tightly to their way of life, holding celebrations in secret and producing beautiful works of art as acts of rebellion and defiance.

Like many objects in the Museum, this hat is a gateway to a deeper understanding of humanity, history, and our place in the world. We may only see its form and function initially, but we can discover vast realms of spirituality and interconnectedness. Objects, things, and the stuff of life can act as a gateway into different world views; they allow us to witness the thoughtful process of making, spirituality, and kinship.



Map of Tlingit speakers and neighbouring peoples released under CC-by-2.0.

Reference and further reading

Berlo, J.C., and R. B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Davy, J. et al, *Empowering Art: Indigenous Creativity and Activism from North Americas Northwest Coast*, (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre).



From telescopes to tortoises, meteorites to the moon landing, the Museum's current temporary exhibition "We Choose to Go to the Moon" showcases the fascinating science and culture of the final frontier.

The exhibition tells the story of humankind's relationship with the cosmos, beginning with an exploration of the building blocks of the universe through a fascinating display of space rocks, including moon rock, Martian rocks and meteorites. Visitors can explore tales of some of the animals that have been to space, including the two tortoises who were the first creatures to orbit the moon.

The story of the moon landing is illustrated through a facsimile of the Apollo 11 flight plan—the spaceflight that took astronauts to the Moon in 1969—and a video installation produced by the Museum’s Collections Assistant and co-curator of the exhibition, Simon Hilton-Smith. The video features original footage from N.A.S.A combined with memories shared with the Museum by the public; from local people to participants from Papa New Guinea

The exhibition also gives a unique insight into the cultural history of space exploration, from the first telescopes to science fiction novels, religious beliefs and ceremonies, to music, design and film. This is all illustrated with fascinating objects from across the Museum’s human history collections as well as objects kindly loaned to the Museum by the public and local community partners. If that’s not enough, visitors can explore the stars with a mini planetarium, and drift into space with the interactive infinity rocket with space soundscape.

The exhibition has been made possible with support from a range of local partners including The Gibson Walden Fund, Saffron Walden Community Shed, Thaxted Astronomical Society, North Essex Astronomical Society and Gerald Lucy of The Rock Gallery as well as many contributions from the public.

The exhibition has been a truly collaborative exercise, and it would not have been possible without our many community partners. Saffron Walden Community Shed were very supportive in bringing the rocket to life, from my 30cm high scale model to the 10ft high interactive rocket that visitors can experience when they visit. On top of that we have been loaned so many fascinating objects and documents, had many memories shared with us, and have received generous funding from The Gibson Walden Fund. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our community partners. I really hope visitors will enjoy learning about these local organisations, who can help them explore space and geology a little further

“We Choose to Go to the Moon” runs at Saffron Walden Museum from October 25th 2024 to March 2nd 2025.

Learning at Saffron Walden Museum: Charlotte Pratt

Things continue to be busy for learning and outreach services at the Museum. Our summer program inspired by “Soggy Sandwiches, Tales of British Summer” was well received by visitors and saw them making, amongst other things, flapping seagulls and hungry sharks !



We have been continuing to work on bringing more ‘interactives’ into the Museum and were pleased to introduce a new member of the team, a life sized woolly mammoth head, into the Early History gallery. The as yet unnamed pachyderm was made using almost entirely recycled materials apart from the fur. Making the model formed part of the summer’s activities with many visitors helping to papier-mache and felt it into existence. It is now in place ready to give mammoth hugs and selfie opportunities to our visitors.



We have had great fun exploring the theme of space in our learning activities this autumn. Simon and I visited Thaxted school to take part in a star gazing night organised by T.A.S (Thaxted Astronomy Society). T.A.S have also very kindly agreed to deliver a star gazing night for us at the Museum on Saturday the 1st of February (TBC) so keep an eye out on our Museum newsletters if you would like

to come along and gaze at the starry skies above Saffron Walden. October half-term was also full of space based fun, with our young crafters making some amazing astronaut helmets and super fun aliens.

Formal learning services continue to be busy this term, and my current assessment of our figures is showing an increase in the number of pupils benefiting from taught sessions delivered by the Museum, which is great, and I hope to continue this upward trend. Assessment of last year’s figures showed that approximately 30% of the schools in Uttlesford used our learning services last year, including both taught activities and loan boxes, and we continue to receive visits from schools from across Essex.

I am now busy planning next year's program of events and, with Simon, planning next year's exhibition celebrating 190 years of the Museum. It is already looking like an exciting program of events and activities and I hope to see you all at some of them.

Museum Society News

Membership

Membership subscription is a minimum of £15 a year and includes;

- Newsletters sent to members three times a year
- Unlimited free entry to the Museum during opening hours – and children get in free, but Special Events may attract a charge
- A programme of evening talks with wide ranging subjects, currently delivered via Zoom during winter months and live during the other part of the year
- Private viewings before the opening of special exhibitions for you and your guest
- An Annual Winter Social Evening, with a Museum quiz trail
- Annual General Meeting – Attend and vote; have your say in how the Museum Society is run.

It was good to see many members at the recent AGM. I wish there had been more time to chat. Please keep in touch.

Sadly, I have lost contact with two members this year and tracing a few others with changed details has been challenging. If you change your email address, telephone number or postal address, please let me know so we may keep in contact.

It has been a difficult year, and I try to keep up with membership as well as being Treasurer and Company Secretary. Both positions need someone who is reasonably comfortable with email, Word and Excel, and an intending Treasurer position would need experience of accountancy and Charities. If you know anyone who is keen to help, please ask them to get in touch.

Christine Sharpe

Reports on Talks

16 September 2024 Fake News

Speaker : Paul Davies

Paul Davies has spent his whole career in and around journalism and he clearly feels strongly about how news reporting can be twisted. What's more the talk also struck a cord with the Saffron Walden public as it attracted a large audience, many of whom had not been to a Museum Society talk before.

He presented a series of case studies about the ways in which stories were distorted, with first rate graphics that showed all too clearly the tricks of the trade. He focussed in on digital newspapers that were free to view, where the paper's income from advertisers depended on the number of pages the "readers" looked at by clicking on another page. For those of us who continue to read "real" newspapers, it was another rather depressing illustration of how modern communications can mislead rather than inform.

21 October 2024 The Good Old Duke of York

Speaker : Richard Till

The subject of this talk was Frederick Duke of York and the Mary Anne Clarke Scandal in the period 1790 to 1810. Richard Till told us that he had found no evidence at all that the Good, or Grand, Old Duke of York had ever marched 10,000 men up or down any hill.

This period of history is one where elites ruled, with only 1% - 2% of the population represented by Parliament, only the wealthy could vote. A period when upper class men had a public school education, and this created an atmosphere that they had the right to power, including power over women. Men were seen as powerful and rational whilst women were weak and emotional. Women only had limited indirect power, by emotional

blackmail, as set out by Mary Wollstonecraft, who promoted education for women as the road to equality. The wealthy classes were accustomed to being able to do anything that they wanted, but they were criticised for lack of moral authority.

The King, George III, was active in politics, and at this time Parliament was split into two groups, the Whigs and the Tories, with King George favouring the latter grouping. He wanted the power to appoint the Prime Minister, and the Tories were content with that, however the Whig opposition were totally opposed to this happening. His favourite son was Frederic, who he sent to run Hanover, where he married Princess Frederica of Prussia, daughter of the King of Prussia. He learned Prussian military ways, and back in England he was promoted to Field Marshal in charge of the British Army, at the age of 32. This was a time when commissions were purchased not earned by merit, and this led to corruption. Frederic wanted to reform the army and set up Sandhurst College to properly train officers, as well as forming the Chelsea Pensioners so that ex-soldiers were looked after when they left the army.

Frederic began an affair with Mary Anne Clarke, an established courtesan, in 1803, which lasted until 1806. She came from a relatively poor background, married at a young age and was divorced not long after. The relationship went well at first until the Duke 'forgot' to pay the rent. Mary retaliated by taking up with young officers who, for a fee, she would arrange promotion. This is it was said, was arranged by pinning their name to the bedhead. Both were seen by the populace as money-grubbing, but the strict libel laws allowed no written criticism, however political cartoons were a way to make the point. Eventually Frederic paid her off with £400 per annum, but she threatened to write all about the affair and memoirs were written. A further payment of £11,000 was made and all the books were burned. Clarke was prosecuted for libel in 1813 and imprisoned for nine months. On her release from prison, she went to live in France. She died in Boulogne-sur-Mer on 21 June 1852.

The war with Napoleon set the background to the story, and corrupt officers were seen as being disloyal to the country. A Major Hogan wrote a letter to the papers setting out how he had been by-passed for promotion to Colonel 16 times by Captains who had paid for advancement. A Parliamentary Enquiry was set up to hear evidence, and the allegations extended beyond the army and into Parliament, where it was said that seats were being bought and sold. A vote narrowly saved the Duke of York but he resigned anyway falling on his father's mercy, and he was later reinstated.

Richard Till cast a strong light on this period of history, evoking comparisons with our own times.

Tony Morton

18 November 2024 - Meteors and Meteorites

Speaker; Ian Lauwerys

There are three very similar words with specific meanings;

Meteoroid --a small rock moving in space

Meteor – a 'Shooting Star' usually about the size of a sand grain moving at 25,000 kph to 160,000 kph and burning up in the atmosphere

Meteorite – a Meteor that has landed

A Meteor compresses the air in front of it which gets very hot, thousands of degrees, and the gas atoms split into protons and electrons to form a plasma. Light is emitted as photons as the plasma recombines.

About 500 fireballs per year are over 1 metre in size and land as meteors

How to see meteors

Meteors can come into the atmosphere from any direction at low frequencies; on an average night there might be 4-6 before midnight and 6-8 after midnight. The difference is because the Earth rotates, and before midnight that part of the sky is trailing the planet's trajectory and only meteors moving faster than the planet can hit the atmosphere, but after midnight that part of the sky is facing the direction of travel of the planet and can encounter more objects which are moving slower; the planet catches up to them.

But at certain times of the year there are larger showers of meteors as Earth passes through a debris stream left by a comet which had an orbit similar to that of the Earth. The best times are;

- August 12 to 13 – Perseids apparently coming from the direction of the constellation Perseus, which can produce 10 to 50 per hour
November 18 – Leonids from the direction of the constellation of Leo, 3 to 10 per hour
December 14 to 15 – Geminids from the direction of the constellation Gemini, 20 to 75 per hour

The direction they come from is called the 'Radiant' and is just the result of the Earth's motion showing the meteors against the background of the distant constellations.

The Great Meteor Storm of 1833 on November 12 to 13 showed a peak of over 100,000, meteors per hour over the United States of America and a total of 240,000 in 9 hours. Outbursts like this occur every 33 years, again due to the details of the Earth's orbit.

How dangerous are meteors?

At Chelyabinsk on 15th February 2013 a meteor estimated as 19 metres in diameter and weighing 9100 tons travelling at 70,000 kph streaked across the sky and exploded in the atmosphere brighter than the sun. Many fragments of this have since been found scattered across the ground. The shockwave from this caused a sonic boom that shattered windows and about 1500 people were injured by flying glass. Some 7200 buildings were damaged. Events of this size can occur every 60 years.

At Tunguska on 30 June 1908 a stony meteoroid about 60 metres in diameter travelling at 1000,000 kph detonated in the air and 2,000 square kilometres of forest was flattened with the trunks radiating outwards from the blast centre. Events of this size can occur 1 in 100 years.

In Arizona the well-known Barringer Crater was formed 500,000 years ago by a Nickel/Iron meteor 50 metres in diameter massing 300,000 tons and moving at 29,000 kph to 46,000 kph. This impact is likely to have killed animals within a 10 kilometre radius.

To demonstrate the comparative scale of these events Ian superimposed circles upon an air photo of Mersea Island, Essex, giving a very good idea of the scale of the damage likely.

Effects on Life

The most well-known example was the Chicxulub impact 66 million years ago in the Caribbean, which led to planet wide changes including the extinction of the dinosaurs, and many other species besides. This was a 10 kilometre diameter object, massing 1 quadrillion tons and travelling at 72,000 kph, and when the leading edge was touching the ocean, the rear edge would have been higher than Mount Everest is today, almost outside the atmosphere. The impact crater has been revealed by modern scanning techniques and is 10 kilometres in diameter. Molten ejecta travelled right around the planet and the heat ignited 70% of the world's forests, with 70% of species extinguished. This type of event is very rare, maybe once every 100 million years to 500 million years.

A previous extinction event at the Permian --Triassic boundary has been suggested as due to a meteor that landed in Araguinha, Brazil, leaving a traceable crater 40 kilometres in diameter, but this is debated as the cause of the extinction.

Where do they come from?

The source of the larger objects is the Oort Cloud, at the fringes of our Solar System up to 1 light year away. The whole galaxy rotates once every 32 million years, and the plane of the solar system passes through the plane of the galaxy, and that gives a gravity nudge to orbiting objects in the Oort cloud sending them inwards.

Human Injuries

The injuries at Chelyabinsk have been mentioned. In Iraq in 1888 a man was hit by a small meteor and died. In 1954 Anne Hodges, a resident of Alabama was bruised when a meteor fell through the roof of her house and hit her leg. Locally to us, the Ashdon Meteor just missed a man working in the fields. A cast of this is in Saffron Walden Museum and is on display as part of the current Exhibition, 'We Choose to go to The Moon'.

Other effects

The Panspermia theories suggest that life on Earth was brought here on meteors from elsewhere in the universe, but this is untestable. Some of the water that is now on Earth was undoubtedly brought here by comets or meteors.

Collecting

This can be done in specific places on Earth where they are easier to spot, like Antarctica where they have been falling for millennia and eventually come to the surface and show up against the white snow background. Deserts are also a good place to look; the north-west deserts of Africa are a good source. But many findings elsewhere are often just slag from metal working in our past.

Tony Morton

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