



Museum Matters

Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Spring 2025 Issue 65

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Highlights and Happenings: From the Chairman

I've never been to a 190th birthday party mainly because they do not crop up too often. Well, on Saturday May 10th we have such an event at the Museum. We can all attend this great occasion and if you are one of the few who have been to another 190th birthday, tell us all about it!

Jenny and the team have put a full programme together and you will find the details in her section of the magazine. Please do put this special day in your diary.

You may well be aware that last October Parliament passed legislation to reorganise local government and Essex County Council volunteered to be a front runner in this change. The result is Uttlesford District Council will be dissolved and its functions moved to a Unitary Authority. Across Essex 13 District and Boroughs will become between 3 to 5 Unitary authorities. In addition, the 2 existing Unitaries, Thurrock and Southend, will be absorbed.

We should know by September how many unitary bodies there will be and to which one we belong. During 2024 we have been in discussion with UDC about changes in our agreement for the last 50 years in the expectation our funding could be reduced. Your directors were advised at the end of February that those discussions would cease and there will be no change before 2027. We would then be talking to the new Unitary Authority.

At last month's Board meeting we agreed we cannot let the grass grow under our feet and we would reconstitute the development group. This group's aim would be for us to have our 200th birthday in our newly revised Museum!

That group has now met and commenced work through three committees. The first "Collections & Buildings" will work de-clutter the inside of the Museum and better align our collections and how they fit into the new space. Over the last year we have received two generous donations totalling £140,000, and this Committee will develop a project utilising these donations with matched funding from another source.

The second sub-Committee “Governance” will address two key issues. First, the majority of Society directors are aged over 80 years. It needs to be another team who leads the celebrations in 10 years’ time. Secondly as regulations and policy constraints grow the Society directors need help in administration and in growing the Society’s membership.

The third sub-Committee will start up later in the year. The Society last year paid £4,000 to create the new website which is now working very well, producing new users and showing value for money. What the Society needs to understand is the value in funding digital marketing activity and how do we measure the results. I suspect there is someone out there who has just the expertise we need! Probably amongst the grandchildren.

We should look forward to an exciting couple of years and any help from members would be gratefully received.

Curator’s Column: Jenny Oxley

As I write, the museum is busy with the sound of families enjoying the Easter holiday craft activities (How is it Easter already!). It is great to see them engaging with the new temporary exhibition, themed around climate change and net zero, called “Letters from the Global South.” James Lumbard-Smith, our Natural Sciences Officer has curated the exhibition based on materials from Zero Hour and Muslims Declare, and supplemented their display posters with items from the museum’s collections to highlight key climate issues.

Behind the scenes we are emerging from year end reporting. However much we plan for this from January onwards every year, it is always quite intense! We are the only part of the district council that does retail, so we have the shop stocktake to do which is a big task. Thank you to Jessica Holbrook, our Museum Support Officer, and the volunteers involved in the stock take for delivering this work so efficiently this year.

Our finance year end user figures were really strong, for Q4 (Jan-Mar ’25) we had 4,799 users, with a cumulative figure for 2024/25 of 17,251 users up from 14,513 in the last financial year! (against a target of 12,000 users). Marked growth which we are thrilled about! We refer to everyone as users in this context, because these figures include visitors to the museum including school visits, but also people we engage with via research enquiries and outreach activities. In addition to these figures we also have online engagement of around 10,000 users per quarter.

The council’s Blueprint Uttlesford review including the museum, has been paused following the announcement of local government reorganisation and the move towards new mayoral and unitary authorities being established in Essex.

We’ve been establishing more partnership working projects with other venues and organisations individually and via the Saffron Walden Tourism, Culture & Heritage Forum. It’s great to open up the museum to even more partnership working, skill and resource sharing opportunities. We look forward to welcoming our new Community Engagement Officer to the team on the 28th April, which should help us deliver this additional work. The museum team have been successful in getting a £10,000 grant from the Rural Economic Prosperity Fund (REPF) to help rural isolation, by building our capacity to do further outreach and community engagement work in the Uttlesford district. We have also received funds for a number of development projects from Museum Development South East (MDSE), including Access Improvement grant (£2,000), Income Generation Grant (£500) and Net Zero project (c. £4,000), with further funds currently being applied for.

Stay Tuned! On Saturday 10th May we are celebrating 190 years of Saffron Walden Museum, with a big Birthday party bash and the launch of our new exhibition “Wonders” where visitors and community organisations are picking their favourite wonders from the Museum’s vast encyclopaedic collections. It’s a lovely opportunity to celebrate the Museum’s past, present and future. Thanks to Simon Hilton-Smith, Collections Assistant and Charlotte Pratt, Learning & Outreach Officer, who are busy preparing the exhibition and out in the community helping people pick their favourite wonders.

Natural Sciences: James Lumbard

Climate and Ecology Hub

The climate and ecology information hub installed before Christmas in the Discovery Centre gallery has caused a rumble in the Museum. It features a unicycle-based phone charger to show how electricity is generated by wind turbines, a flip-book highlighting local community groups who work to protect our climate and environment, and a protest placard from the Climate Strike for Solutions held in Saffron Walden in February 2020.

Exhibition and film screening

The temporary exhibition Letters From the Global South shared emotional letters from activists and schoolchildren in developing countries about how climate change is affecting their lives already. It was loaned by Zero Hour UK and featured items from the SWM collections, including a leopard skin, hippo tusk and carved ivory, highlighting themes from the letters. Thanks to Aid Alliance, we hosted a free screening of *The Ants* and the Grasshopper, which was well received and prompted a detailed discussion afterwards of the themes of climate change, personal experiences, politics and inner strength.

Grant funding

James successfully applied for over £4000 of grant funding from Museum Development South East to help reduce the Museum's carbon emissions and promote climate and energy awareness across the district. The money will be used to insulate areas of the off-site collection stores, upgrade fluorescent tubes to LEDs as they break and purchase equipment for community engagement work across the district (including the film screening mentioned above!)

Our favourite fumitory

Our rare few-flowered fumitory (*Fumaria vaillantii*), an annual wildflower related to the poppy, has a strong showing this year with a good number of seedlings germinated below the Local History gallery window. Keep an eye out for its feathery foliage and, in the summer, its delicate, pink, tubular flowers.



Collections Assistant, Human History: Simon Hilton-Smith

What an exhilarating start to the year it has been! We have been caught in a whirlwind of activity, from our captivating astronomical nights to eye-opening climate change exhibitions, all while gearing up for our grand 190th birthday celebration. Recently, I had the pleasure of hosting a researcher specializing in wall paintings who is diving into a new book about how Maynard (Junior) beautifully recreated original decorations in painted panels now on display in our museum.

We also had the privilege of welcoming the remarkable Professor Ulinka Rublack from Cambridge! She came to examine the stunning Cornwallis lace-bark cap and gown—truly unique pieces that showcase the exquisite craftsmanship achieved when nature and human artistry come together. These treasures have been carefully selected by Peter Moore, the current curator at Audley End, to feature in our upcoming exhibition, 'Wonders:

190 Years of Saffron Walden Museum,' which highlights our deep connection to the estate that has supported us through the years.

It was such a delightful afternoon with Professor Rublack as we explored various bark cloths and delved into our fascinating accession registers from the very beginnings of the museum. By the end of our time together, I was thrilled to receive an invitation to join the Material Cultures Forum at Cambridge University alongside Nick Thomas from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and others. I may be a bit biased, but I believe our world cultures collection stirs the most captivating inquiries and reveals extraordinary stories. This rich resource opens doors to enhancing the museum's reputation on the global stage, particularly through research. A special shout-out to our dedicated collections volunteer, Dr. Black, who is diligently conducting a full collection audit to ensure our pieces continue to inspire researchers and visitors for years to come.

As for the exhibition 'Wonders,' preparations are in full swing! The excitement keeps me busy with ambitious builds, lively parties, and significant outreach efforts, both completed and on the horizon. A heartfelt thank you to everyone who attended and selected their extraordinary objects on Monday, March 24th. It was wonderful to meet new faces and reconnect with familiar ones, sharing stories and memories about our beloved museum. I truly hope some of you will consider having your stories recorded so we can preserve these memories for future generations.

Outreach has continued to thrive throughout that week, with visits from Support 4 Sight and a whirlwind tour of local schools to raise awareness while showcasing some astonishing taxidermy. As launch day approaches (May 10th!), the workload is intensifying. The buzz of activity fills the air: paint and screws, Perspex and glue—there's cabinetry to construct, wonders to unveil, and parties to organise. Exciting times lie ahead!

Object of the Month

January 2025

The archaeology collections.

January's Object of the Month was focused on the Museum's archaeology collections. The display included finds from the Anglo-Saxon manor site at Wicken Bonhunt, discovered after fieldwalking by Bari Hooper in 1967 and subsequently excavated in the 1970s when the M11 was built. Pictured is a bone comb from the site which dates to between 650 and 900 AD. On display in January was also a beautiful bone flute from the same site.



In general, the Museum's archaeology collections illustrate the prehistory and early history of north-west Essex from the Ice Ages to the Middle Ages. Important collections include early stone and bronze tools, Iron Age farming, Roman and Saxon life and items of Treasure found by metal detectorists in the local area. Objects of particular interest in the archaeology collections include the North-West Essex Anglo-Saxon ring, a Viking necklace and a Roman moulded glass bowl, which can be seen along with the bone comb, on display in the Museum's ground floor archaeology gallery.

There are also significant collections of finds from the Roman town at Great Chesterford, Iron Age and Roman sites at Wendens Ambo and Great Dunmow and a medieval farm at Stebbingford. The Museum receives site archives (the finds and records) from archaeological excavations and fieldwork in north-west Essex. Airport, road and housing developments and community projects in the area are continually revising and increasing our understanding of human activity in the district.

February 2025 Protest Placard



February's Object of the Month is a protest placard from a supporter of the Strike for Solutions organised and attended by high school students from across Uttlesford. On 14th February 2020, students and other activists and supporters gathered in the market square in protest against slow and insufficient local government action on climate change, then marched to Uttlesford District Council's offices. This placard was donated by an adult supporter who was also at the march. It has a list of simple actions to do at home to help reduce waste and greenhouse gas emissions. The placard itself was made with reused and recyclable materials.

See this object at the Museum in the new Climate and Ecology Hub display where you can explore the causes and evidence for climate change, find local action groups, discover positive actions we can all take, learn how wind turbines work, and even charge your phone using our human-powered generator. The climate hub is dedicated to providing education and fostering in-depth discussions about environmental changes occurring both locally and globally. It serves as a platform for sharing knowledge, raising awareness, and encouraging community engagement on pressing climate issues that impact our world.

March 2025 Associate of the Royal Red Cross (ARRC) medal Awarded to Miss Nancy Winter

To celebrate Women's History Month, we are looking at just one of the many extraordinary women from Uttlesford.

Although we do not have much information about Miss Nancy Winter, records indicate that she dedicated her life to nursing until her passing in 1938. Her nursing career began at the Women's Hospital in Soho Square, where she received her first nursing certificate between 1881 and 1884. In 1884, she worked at the General Hospital in Wolverhampton before moving to Saffron Walden Hospital, where she served from 1884 to 1890.


Miss Winter was awarded the Associate of the Royal Red Cross (ARRC) medal. This award is given to fully trained nurses in officially recognised nursing services, whether military or civilian, who have demonstrated exceptional devotion and competence in their nursing duties over an extended period or who have performed an extraordinary act of bravery and dedication while on duty.



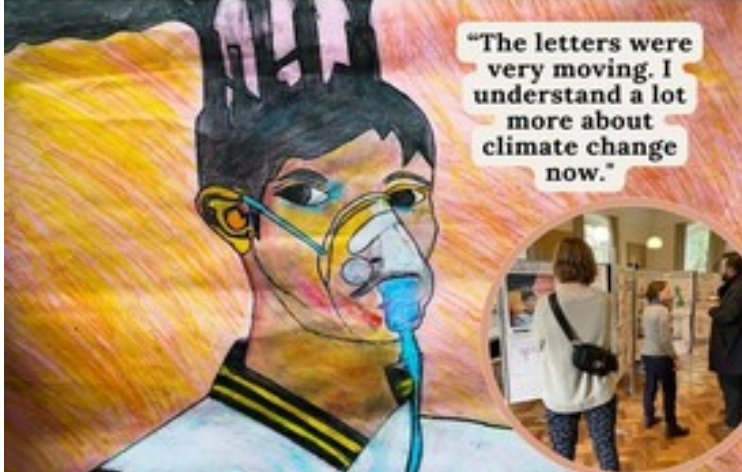
To learn more about the extraordinary Women from our area, visit the Museum in March.

Exhibitions and Events:

8th March to 27th April

LETTERS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH 




A FREE, FAMILY-FRIENDLY EXHIBITION



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Explore the wonders of
Saffron Walden Museum
as chosen by you
May 10 - Oct 12, 2025.

WONDERS

190 YEARS OF SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM

Learning and Outreach: A Year of Growth and Community Engagement: Charlotte Pratt

The past year has seen a remarkable upswing in the participation and engagement of our Learning and Outreach services, with positive results continuing through the winter season. The final figures for the year reveal a substantial increase in both user numbers and income, highlighting the success of our ongoing efforts to expand and enhance our educational programming.

Record-Breaking Numbers

User engagement for Learning and Outreach services, which includes loan boxes, events, and taught sessions for both schools and adult groups, has seen a 40% increase compared to last year's figures. This growth has been mirrored in income generation for learning services, which is up over 30% from the previous year. This growth is a direct result of various strategic changes and community-driven initiatives.

Strategic Marketing and Targeted Outreach

One of the primary factors contributing to this success is the reimagined marketing approach for our schools' services. In addition to traditional methods such as printed leaflets and emails, we have embraced the power of targeted online advertisements aimed at educators and schools within the surrounding area. This has allowed us to reach a wider audience and generate greater awareness of the services we offer.

Space Exhibition: A Seasonal Hit

Another key driver of increased footfall was our popular "We Choose to Go to the Moon" exhibition, which proved to be a perfect fit for the winter season. The exhibition, along with its associated events, attracted a wide range of visitors, enhancing the overall visitor experience. Space Night was a standout event, drawing over 200 visitors during a three-hour evening program. We were fortunate to have clear skies, allowing attendees to engage in stargazing through telescopes provided by the Thaxted Astronomical Society (TAS). The event was a great success, thanks in large part to Steve and his team from TAS, who worked tirelessly to create an engaging and educational atmosphere for all.

Inside the Museum, a variety of activities continued to entertain and inform, all curated by the enthusiastic volunteers from TAS. This collaborative effort was integral to the event's success, and we are incredibly grateful to Steve, TAS, and all our staff and volunteers who made it happen. Without their support, these events simply would not be possible.



Space-Themed Craft Events: Engaging Creativity

During the February half-term, our space-themed craft sessions also proved popular with families. One of the highlights was the “infinity box” craft, which allowed visitors to spend more time creating a unique and intricate piece of art. This longer, more immersive experience proved to be a hit, and we’re excited to replicate this format for future seasonal events, including the upcoming summer season.

Looking Ahead: Summer Plans and Collaborative Curation

As we look toward the summer season, the Museum is buzzing with excitement about the Wonders exhibition and the outreach activities that will accompany it. In the first week of the outreach program, objects have been selected through the collective efforts of our dedicated volunteer team, the Saffron Walden Museum Society (the charitable trust that owns the Museum and its collections), Support 4 Sight, and five local schools from across the district.

Throughout April, the Museum will continue working with a range of community groups, collaborating to curate an exhibition that highlights the diverse perspectives and interests of our local community. The exhibition will open on Saturday, May 10th, with a fun-filled birthday party to celebrate the Museum’s 190th birthday and the wonders that it holds in its collection.

Gratitude and Anticipation

We are incredibly grateful for the support we’ve received from the community, volunteers, and our partner organisations. As we move into the summer, we look forward to continuing our mission of providing accessible, engaging, and educational experiences for all, and sharing lots of wonder along the way.

Stay tuned for more updates, and we hope to see you at the Museum soon!

Museum Society News: Membership

Hello!

Sadly, I am forced to reconsider my voluntary activities which means that the Society is looking for more help with several tasks including Membership and Treasurer/ Company Secretary

Do you know anyone who would like to volunteer. I would love to hear from them.

You should have received the usual reminder that subscriptions for the year to 31 March 2026 are due on 1 April 2025. The minimum subscription is £15 per person but any extra is always welcome and will be used wisely. Thank you to everyone who pays promptly. It makes life much easier!



Membership cards have been issued with these reminders. If you received notification by email, please remember to print and complete your own card as you will need to show it when visiting the museum. In the absence of a membership card the desk volunteer will need to charge an entrance fee.

If you are not able to print your card, please ask me for one. I keep a small stock of printed cards for members on email but without printers and expect to be at the talks with spare cards. If this is not convenient, and is requested, named cards can be left at the welcome desk in the Museum.

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 Social Evening, with a Museum quiz trail
- Annual General Meeting – Attend and vote; have your say in how the Museum Society is run.

Christine Sharpe

Reports on Talks

“If you go down to the woods today”

Speaker; Liz Huxley

20 January 2025

The talk centred around photographs taken by Liz Huxley, mainly in woodlands in the Frinton area, showing the range of species that can be found there. Liz has an excellent eye for taking photographs of very high quality which bring the wildlife alive.

Beginning in Winter, when things can seem very empty and dead, but the quality of light can play a big part, at dawn and dusk, and with mist and shadows. Looking up through the canopy adds another dimension. Spring brings first sign of the return of life, with pussy willow, followed by Wood Anemone and then by April the Bluebells cover the ground in some woods, also bringing their scent. Early Purple Orchid flowers around the same time. Photographs of mammals are harder to take, due to their elusiveness, but Liz had pictures of Fallow and Muntjac deer, Fox and Badger, Grey Squirrel and a Weasel.

Woodland bird species are similar to those found in gardens, which often provide a similar habitat. Photos of Robin, Wren, Long-Tailed Tit Chaffinch, Brambling, Siskin, Redpoll, Bullfinch and Great Spotted Woodpecker illustrated the range of species. Treecreepers and Nuthatches illustrated how different species share a habitat, with Treecreepers working up a trunk, while Nuthatches tend to move down the trunk. On the woodland floor Blackbirds will be seen flicking leaves over in search of insects, but their relatives visiting in winter, the Redwing and Fieldfare, are fruit eaters. Predators are also present, Sparrowhawk, Common Buzzard, and Tawny Owl were shown. At dusk birds can come into woods to roost in large numbers, and corvids like the Crows and Jackdaws often do this.

Autumn fungi were illustrated with photos of Fly Agaric, Parasol, Shaggy Inkcap, Puffball, Amethyst Deceiver, and the bracket fungi of Beefsteak and Turkey Tail.

A fascinating ‘walk’ around the typical woods of our county.

Cartography and Cosmograms: The Heavens Made Manifest

Simon-Hilton-Smith

11 February 2025

A cosmogram is a geometric diagram, a visual depiction of a real or imagined version of the earth or universe and the place that people play in it. Simon-Hilton-Smith took us on a tour around the world to look at these representations of the world in many cultures. These drawings depict a cosmology, or theory about the origins of

the universe. Cosmograms seek to illustrate where we came from and where we are going. They provide an explanation for life as we know it, offering the comfort of certainty in a confusing world.

The geometric forms often include circles, which represent the universe, and crosses that represent the Earth. Various maps have been drawn up, known as Mappa Mundi, to show in part a real geographical territory but also the place that mankind occupied in it, often with the deity shown at the top of the diagram. They have a spiritual dimension. The British Library has a Psalter from the 13th Century with Jerusalem at the centre of the known world, and the garden of Eden is shown at the top. The 12 winds are shown around the edges, and the three continents of Europe, Africa and Asia are shown with the Mediterranean in a T formation separating them. The Hereford Mappa Mundi is very complex; an iconography rather than a geographical map, including biblical stories. A picture of celestial order and earthly life.

World Trees are another common theme found in many traditions around the world, representing ancient wisdom or mythology. In Norse mythology the world tree is called Yggdrasil, an Ash tree, with three roots and multiple branches. At its roots lie Niflheim, the realm of ice and cold, and Muspelheim, the land of fire, symbolizing the primordial forces that shape the world. Midgard, the realm of humanity, is nestled among Yggdrasil's branches, while Asgard, the home of the gods, sits high above, accessible by the rainbow bridge Bifröst. a complex ecosystem showing the cycle of life.

Buddhism uses the symbol of the sacred fig tree to explain the universe. In Tibet the sand mandala is a complex diagram laboriously created from coloured grains of sand to show the cycle of creation, and it is then destroyed by being swept up.

In Hinduism the city of Ankor Watt in Cambodia is laid out as a cosmogram, as a 'city temple' dedicated to Vishnu the protector or guardian. The architecture here shows the pinnacle of the Khmer civilisation symbolising the king and his divine authority, monumental temples cement his authority and provide a dwelling for the divine. The temples and axial layout of the city act as a microcosmic representation of the universe aligned with the movements of the sun and the planets.

The form of a cross is a widely used symbol around the world, in Christian imagery obviously, but also in Africa in the Dikenga, the Kongo cosmogram, one of the oldest in the world. This is an ancient circular symbol that depicts the cosmology of the BaKongo people, a tribe residing in central Africa and the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. It was used as a sacred prayer symbol and primarily depicts the four important phases of human life based on the movement of the sun. The cosmogram symbolizes eternal life, immortality of the soul, interconnectedness of being, universal balance, divinity, spiritual awakening and magical powers.

The Ankh, an ancient Egyptian symbol is well known as a significant symbol of spiritual practices, a talisman with protective qualities

A fascinating introduction to a very complex topic, which can be followed up by searching the world wide web for some of the examples cited in this report.

The Rise and Fall of the Bradburys of Wicken

Speaker: Martin Rose

17 March 2025

The family history of the Bradburys has been researched in detail by Martin Rose, revealing a saga worthy of any television drama, indeed in many ways even more unbelievable. The period covered is 1555 to 1745, during which times the family owned a substantial proportion of the parish of Wicken Bonhunt, not all of which it seems was acquired by strictly legal means, but when you are the local Justice of the Peace as William Bradbury was during his reign of nearly 40 years, enclosing much land and blocking local roads to suit his own convenience was a normal thing. Many of the family heirs died young, and internal litigation between surviving family members ensued, so that the management of the estate suffered, eventually disappearing altogether.

Newsletters

Just to remind you that the previous editions of the Museum Society Newsletter back to Summer 2014 are all available on the Museum Society website, and form a considerable resource. The Newsletters are viewed a lot each month, for example 238 downloads of past Newsletters in March 2025, a typical amount. The list can be viewed on this page <https://swmuseumsoc.org.uk/newsletters/> from where each edition can be downloaded.

Visit the Museum!

Standard Hours

Monday – Closed

Tuesday - 10am-4:30pm

Wednesday - reserved for schools and pre-booked groups in term time.

(During Essex School holidays Wednesdays 10am-4:30pm)

Thursday - Saturday 10am-4:30pm

Sundays & Bank Holidays 2-4:30pm

Who to contact ...

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