

Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Autumn 2025 Issue 67

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Highlights and Happenings: From the Chairman

You might think that as I write this update on Guy Fawkes night it will be cold and rainy as it is most years. Instead, we have a dry and balmy day which augurs well for what winter might bring us.

As Jenny Oxley's report will detail, we have just finished a successful exhibition "Wonder: 190 years of Saffron Walden Museum" and launched last week "Pooch" a charming show for all the Family but an absolute must for dog lovers. With much else happening at the Museum, it's wonderful to see increasing numbers of folk visiting us whether at Museum, through our outreach programs or via social media.

The Schoolroom which we have owned since 1966 has been returned to us for use following the departure of the last tenant. The Board has agreed to make it become our meeting place for Talks and meetings including this year's AGM. We have had two successful talks on Hatfield Heath WW2 POW Camp and Peacemakers of the English Civil War.

Based on incredibly positive feedback from Members who attended these talks and as part of our Development Plan, the Board has agreed for the Schoolroom to have next year a major improvement with additional toilet and kitchen facilities and modern media support.

The Board attended today our Quarterly Museum Management Meeting where District Councillors and UDC Officers monitor and plan. Tony Watson, our President outlined the work of the Development Plans, Building & Collections subcommittee and our proposals for 2035. The improvement of the Schoolroom is the first step.

We expect to know early in the new year which Unitary Authority we are destined to live in and as we do know we start to plan more detail to our vision.

As the poet said, "reasons to be cheerful".

Keith Eden

Curator's Column: Jenny Oxley

It's been a very busy few months for the museum team, both staff and volunteers, even by our usual standards! We recently installed and launched our new exhibition POOCH The exhibition celebrates humanity's enduring bond with the dog and brings together archaeology, science, folklore, and pop culture to tell the fascinating story of our "best friend." From the earliest archaeological evidence tracing the evolution of domestic dogs to their role in today's society, POOCH invites visitors to explore the many ways dogs have shaped - and been shaped by - human lives. The exhibition features fascinating objects loaned from Essex Police Museum, The Black Shuck Festival and Guide Dogs (The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association) as well as photos and stories from the community. POOCH is free with standard admission and is open until the 12th of April. Viewers of the exhibition I'm sure will join me in agreeing that the team are really honing their exhibition design and installation skills, with every temporary exhibition that is planned, built and launched.

On the events front, our October howling half-term activities were similarly canine themed, and very well received. The team worked hard to deliver the pre-Halloween night event especially. In October, we also worked with Essex Cultural Diversity Partnership and the CALF group to deliver a literacy event in the museum for Black History Month and Heritage Open Day. The event worked really well for the museum, attracting new audiences and utilising the collections in a different way.

Coinciding with the launch weekend of the new POOCH exhibition, the museum also hosted part of the 1647 Reimagined event, led by the Saffron Walden Heritage Development Group CIC. Sealed Knot re-enactors led a colour party around the town, to the market square and the Old Sun Inn, held a dramatic recreation of the 17th century political debates, with a Q&A in the Parish Church, before firing black powder in the museum / castle grounds, and demonstrating textile weaving and traditional games in the bay window of the museum's Great Hall.

Behind the scenes, James Lumbard-Smith, our Natural Sciences Officer has gone on secondment to the Uttlesford District Council Climate Change team for 18 months. For the time being please contact me regarding any Natural Sciences queries joxley@uttlesford.gov.uk

We're busy processing and cataloguing archaeological finds and paperwork at our Shire Hill store, as we remain the district repository for archaeological survey work: finds and reports which result from new building and development work undertaken in Saffron Walden and the surrounding area.

In mid-September we hosted the ICON Fluid Specimens course, which attracted natural scientists from the UK, Ireland, Sweden, Poland and Australia. They were trained up on how to care for and repair specimens. It was lovely to host them, and this had the added benefit of us getting the fluid specimens in our own collections thoroughly checked and revitalised for free.

The Mary Queen of Scots glove currently on display in the museum's costume gallery will be going out on loan to Peterborough Museum later this month for their temporary exhibition.

The museum was featured in Sky History's "World's Most Unexplained!" Series 1, episode 25, Hidden Treasure in September. Originally filmed in 2020, the programme featured the enigmatic story of the hidden Bishop's Castle Coin Hoard (Piano Coin Hoard), which was discovered in 2016 and is now on display in the museum's local history gallery.

We are continuing to see marked growth in our user figures (and income). July-September 2025/'26, the museum user figures were up to 5,975 users from 3,800 users last financial year, against a target figure of 3,100 users. This is the highest quarterly user figure for the museum, recorded to date (previously we had reached a high of 4,799 in Oct-Dec 2024/'25). The term "users" includes those who visit the museum, as well as those who we interact with via research enquiries, school visits and outreach activities in the district.

We have seen the considerable increase in users due largely to the introduction of "Murder in the Museum" an immersive murder mystery app game, run by Cardboard Clues, at no expense to the museum. It shows the power of having more of our Facebook social media posts sponsored to boost the algorithm, to enable us to be seen by a broader audience. Over the summer holidays it was hard to log in to Facebook without seeing an advert for our Cardboard Clues game. Cardboard Clues is proving very beneficial in attracting non-users, increasing dwell time (how long people visit the museum for) and shop sales. Between the end of July and early November we have

welcomed around 270 teams to the museum, which has brought in an extra £1,000 of income. We have now extended Cardboard Clues until the beginning of March 2026, due to its success.

We've taken on a new maintenance volunteer, Jerry Martlew, to assist with minor repairs and re-painting work. We've also taken on and are training up additional welcome desk and activities volunteers. We continue to receive many requests to host schools' work experience placements, but currently we do not have enough capacity to support these unfortunately.

Two of our valued volunteers, Jane Hook and Bridget Featherstone have done amazing work tidying up and revamping the flower beds in front of the museum, which has made a major difference to the appearance and presentation of the museum, when visitors arrive. Jane has kindly donated items to the museum in the past year including a big floor mat for the revamped museum entrance hall/welcome desk, as well as plant pots to go either side of the entrance door. These donations have been very gratefully received. This quarter, Jane, Bridget and June Baker, our much-loved Volunteer Co-ordinator (volunteer) have negotiated a large donation of plants from Beeches Nursery in Ashdon, after Alan Bidwell, who was a specialist plantsman sadly passed away and the family were looking for good homes for the specialist plants. Jane and Bridget are now working on creating a gardening group for the museum and working with museum staff to apply for funding.

If you would like more information about the museum, consider signing up for our [monthly E-News](#)

Collections Officer, Human History: Simon Hilton-Smith

The view from my office

Throughout the summer months, when the days are long and glorious, the museum experiences a decline in research activity. This was something I appreciated after the launch of the museum's 190th birthday exhibition, 'Wonders'. As schools and universities reopen, our inboxes begin to fill with requests, from museums asking for toys and games from around the world for exhibitions, to those wishing to visit and see our incredible collection, including items from Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Australian collection from John Helder Wedge, and the Bennet donations, beautifully marked with handwritten labels 'from the South Seas'.

Recently, I had a memorable visit from a private researcher, a former Guardian and Times journalist, who had just completed a book about a famous Polynesian from the era of initial encounters and the first visitor to these shores. Mai (or Omai) met Captain James Cook and travelled with him to the United Kingdom. Once there, Mai quickly became famous, touring small towns and attracting crowds eager to see this unusual man from a distant land across vast oceans. His portrait by Joshua Reynolds has recently been preserved for the nation by the National Portrait Gallery, with help from the Getty in the USA, and is now displayed at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge alongside objects from his island homeland. This preservation was largely due to our friendly visiting ex-journalist, who led the campaign. Her visit to Saffron Walden aimed to see items from Cook's third voyage- his final one- where Cook met his end, and where Mai also returned home. She wanted to see objects Mai might have known, seen, or touched to better understand his world and time in a strange land.

The wonder of our museum collection, spanning human, social, and natural history, lies in its broad scope. Simple objects tell stories of trade, networks of items and knowledge. Not only do objects from Polynesia connect this small town and district to islands in the tropics, to portraits in national and international galleries, and to one of the most famous people of their time, but the simplest clock, cheese press, or uniform links us to Europe, the Americas, Asia, and beyond. As the researchers emerge from obscurity, as other museums request to borrow from our collection, as our items, of which we are only temporary custodians, reveal more secrets, I look forward to uncovering new stories and finding innovative ways to share their tales.



Joshua Reynolds, Portrait of Mai, 1776, Oil on Canvas, National Portrait Gallery, London.

Object of the Month

August 2025

Sir Hiram Maxim's "Pipe of Peace" 1910

August's Object of the Month is a "Pipe of Peace" Maxim Inhaler sold c. 1910 by Gillings Chemist in Saffron Walden. It was designed by Hiram Stevens Maxim (1840-1916) an American inventor, who was best known for inventing the first portable, fully automatic machine gun in 1884.

Maxim was a lifelong sufferer of Bronchitis and wanted to invent something that would help "ease the respiratory illnesses of the masses." The Maxim Inhaler promised to treat throat and chest problems such as bronchitis, "winter cough," throat infections, "lung troubles" and colds.



Soothing vapours from water warmed with a few drops of oil, named "Dirigo" based on Maxim's own recipe using menthol and wintergreen, were delivered via a long swan-necked glass tube to the back of the user's throat.

This product was initially perceived as quackery – a fake medical practice, but eventually its effectiveness spread, and hundreds of thousands of these inhalers were sold in the early 20th century.

September 2025

Nocturnal or Night Dial.

Donated by Stebbing Leverett



September's Object of the Month is a Nocturnal, or night dial. Imagine navigating vast open seas in the 17th century, how would you know the time without access to today's technology? Nocturnals would have been

used to measure time, based on the position of a reference star, such as Ursa Minor (the Little Dipper), in relation to Polaris, the North Star. The outer edge of the lower disc shows the months and days, while the inner disc shows the hours. The inner disc would have been set to indicate the date, and Polaris sighted through the opening at the top of the instrument.

The “pointer” would then be rotated to the chosen “reference star”, which would have then given an indication of the time. It wouldn’t have worked that well in bad weather and cloudy skies though! This example of a Nocturnal was presented to the museum in 1909 by Stebbing Leverett. It is inscribed “for both bears”, in reference to the 2 constellations, Big Dipper and Little Dipper, or Great Bear and Little Bear. It consists of 3 wooden disks of boxwood, one with carved wooden heart, pivoted together with brass dials. Stebbing Leverett (1836-1909) was an alderman of Saffron Walden for 37 years. He owned Stebbing Leverett & Sons Outfitters, a drapers and grocers shop on Market Hill in Saffron Walden, which he took over from his father John Leverett. John Leverett was the Mayor of Saffron Walden in 1851 and an alderman. Stebbing Leverett donated items to the museum in the mid-1850s and there are invoices and bills from Stebbing Leverett & Sons Outfitters in the museum's document archive.



October 2025 Beefsteak Fungus Wax Model

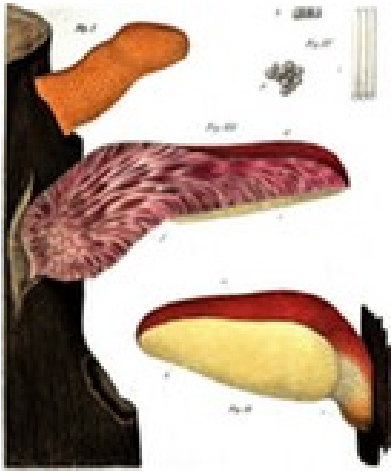
This wax model of the beefsteak or ox tongue fungus illustrates how it occurs naturally, with several bracket-shaped fruiting bodies growing close together on a tree trunk. In life, the fungus has a glossy red top surface and a creamy white underside. The colours in the original wax have faded since it was made, sometime between 1880 and 1904.



The beefsteak fungus is an edible fungus and is named after its similarity when sliced to a cut of raw meat. It is also described as a good substitute for a cut of beef in a meal, when prepared in the right way. The historic label shown with the model describes the best way of cooking the fungus to replace steak.

“... cut it into slices about an inch thick, then scald them by placing them in a pan of boiling water for a few seconds, dry them with a cloth. Smear each steak with oil or butter and sprinkle each with pepper salt. Dust them with flour then give ten minutes grilling. Garnish with fried onion.”





The scientific name for the fungus, *Fistulina hepatica*, also alludes to its resemblance to meat – *hepatica* is a Latin word meaning liver. This botanical illustration depicts the beefsteak fungus from the side when sliced (top) and when whole (bottom), emphasising its similarity to fibrous or veined meat. The drawing originates from an Italian manuscript from 1835 titled *Description of the most common edible mushrooms in Italy and the poisonous ones that can be confused with them*, featuring 44 coloured images.

This model is part of a collection of over 30 wax models of fungi created by George Nathan Maynard during his tenure as curator of Saffron Walden Museum between 1880 and 1904.

References;

Photograph [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fistulina_hepatica_\(44936245131\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fistulina_hepatica_(44936245131).jpg) Lukas from London, England, CC BY-SA 2.0

Illustration https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/Vittadini_-_Fistulina_hepatica.png Carlo Vittadini, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons *Descrizione dei funghi mangerecci più comuni dell'Italia e de' velenosi che possono co'medesimi confondersi cu 44 de imagini colorate*

November 2025
Naga Spear and Belt
Chosen by Simon Hilton-Smith



This month's object, or rather objects of the month, are a Naga Spear and Belt from Nagaland and the Naga peoples of North Eastern India. The spear is one and a half metres in length, made up of a wooden shaft with a forged steel blade attached at the top. The upper third of the spear, just before the blade, is decorated with hair dyed in red and black in alternating colours, with pom-poms fastened to the shaft using rattan cords and tree sap glue. The belt is made of blue woven material, decorated with red threads in a zig-zag and diamond lozenge pattern. Suspended from the bottom of the belt, a fringe of hair dyed red hangs gathered into multiple small ponytails, decorated with a yellow bead where the hairs meet the belt. The Nagas craft many beautiful objects,

including their traditional attire. The costume and spear are intricately adorned with hair dyed in red and black, a common colour scheme among the peoples of the Naga Hills.



The Naga consist of over 20 tribes with diverse origins, cultures, and languages, numbering about 2.5 million people today. These groups mainly reside in small villages on hillsides and near water sources in the Naga Hills of Nagaland state, northeastern India. The tribes have various forms of political organisation, ranging from autocracy to democracy, with authority sometimes vested in a council of elders or a tribal council. The different tribes farm rice and millet and hunt alongside Naga fishermen, who are known for using poisons to incapacitate or kill fish.

The Naga people were traditionally known as headhunters; sometimes, their village outskirts—consisting of huts on stilts—were decorated with displays of shrunken heads. The Nagas opposed British rule, and it was in opposition to the British that they found a sense of national identity. However, by the 1930s, an uneasy peace had been established, and due to numerous missions within Nagaland, many had converted from Animism to Christianity.

The invasion of Burma, whose borders with India are inhabited by the Naga, by Japanese imperial forces saw the Naga caught up in the conflict. Although the Naga had only just come to terms with the British, they established a relationship with the British and Indian armies, forming a guerrilla force that operated in the Burmese jungle, acting as scouts and guides for various Commonwealth forces.

The Naga not only scouted and guided but were also known for attacking Japanese patrols. During 1944, a crucial year for British and Commonwealth forces in India and Burma, the Naga provided vital intelligence despite facing punishment from the Japanese. Frederick Weedman of the 7th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment recalls that on one occasion, a Naga headman was flogged until he passed out, refusing to reveal the locations of the British forces. When he regained consciousness, he was forced to watch his wife receive the same punishment. Both remained resolute despite the terrible torture.



The Naga played a vital role in British operations, gathering intelligence, supplies, and transporting the wounded even under heavy fire. The Naga are just one example of the many irregular forces that contributed to the Allies' victory worldwide. In many conflicts, Britain has been supported by smaller nations or tribes who find themselves forced to make a choice amid immense pressures, fighting for their own survival in a war not of their making, yet giving everything in the hope of recognition of their state, nation, or simply their identity.



Today, the Naga nation is fighting for independence, which they first declared in 1947 following the partition of India and Pakistan, in an ongoing guerrilla conflict with Indian authorities. However, their cause remains largely unknown outside the region. Like many tribal peoples who forged a cohesive identity in response to 19th- and 20th-century imperialism, smaller groups and peoples are often overlooked in favour of larger notions of nationhood and have since struggled to find a voice on the international stage.

Many of these individuals, tribes, peoples, and nations often go unrecognised in our November celebrations and remembrances, yet many members of the main Allied forces owe their lives to the Naga and others like them, who fought against overwhelming and technologically advanced odds

by utilising their knowledge and skills to support the Allied cause.

Again, Frederick Weedman recalls that ‘many British soldiers owe their lives to the Naga... No people were more faithful to the Allied Cause, or have deserved better of it than the Nagas. They were truly “The Great Little Gentleman of the Jungle”’.

References

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Weedman, Frederick. ‘Naga –“The Great Little Gentleman of the Jungle”, WW2, The People's War, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/38/a5148038.shtml>

‘Nagas in India’, Minority Rights Group. < <https://minorityrights.org/communities/nagas/>>.

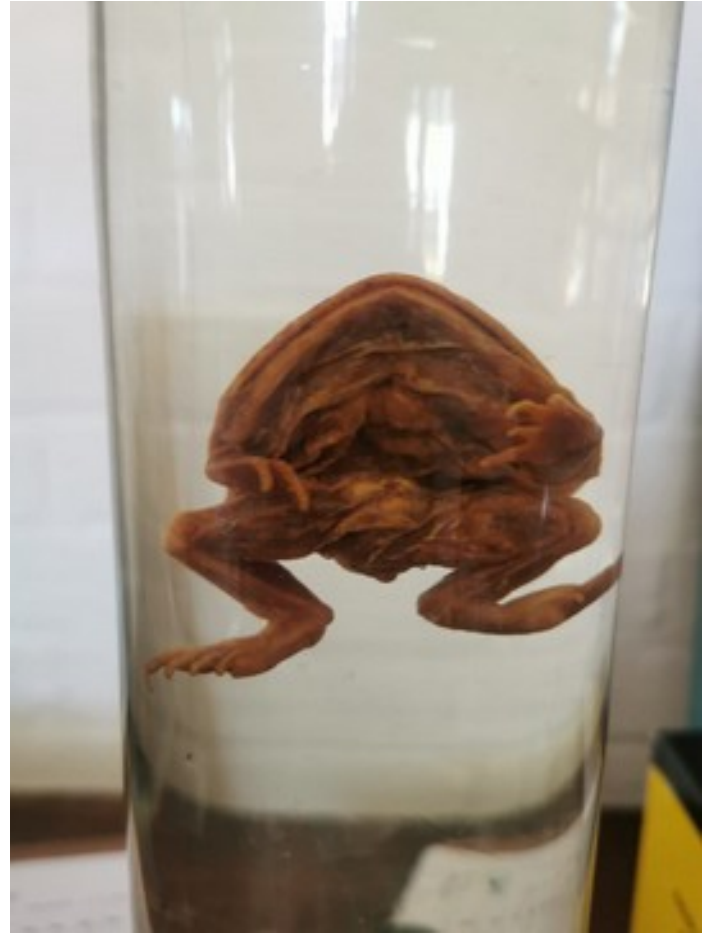
Learning at Saffron Walden Museum: Charlotte Pratt

Preserving the Past: Fluid Preservation Course Led by Simon Moore = 15-18 October International Museum Professionals Gathered at Saffron Walden Museum for Specialist Conservation Training

From 15 to 18 October, museum professionals from around the globe converged in our school room for a hands-on course in fluid preservation, led by renowned natural history conservator Simon Moore. Participants hailed from as far afield as Poland, Australia, and Ireland. I was delighted to build on my knowledge, and it was just as fascinating as the previous course and subsequent placement at Calke Abbey where I learned skills in taxidermy conservation.

Simon Moore, whose expertise in natural history conservation is recognised internationally, guided students through the delicate art of preserving biological specimens in fluid. The four-day workshop covered a range of topics, including specimen preparation, the selection of preservation fluids, and long-term storage solutions. Simon gave practical demonstrations combined with the opportunity to apply our new skills practically to the Museum’s own wet specimen collection was invaluable. The course emphasised practical skills that participants could immediately apply in their home institutions, ensuring that collections are preserved for future generations. Topics such as fluid replacement, jar sealing, mount making, glass cutting and etching, the making of glass pins, and the care of historical specimens were particularly well received.

Over the four days all of the wet specimens on show in our Discovery Centre along with some other specimens not usually on display had the seals checked and replaced where necessary and the fluid topped up. We also rehydrated some dried-out specimens including the frogs in these images (an untraced object with no data) which I worked on across the four day program. Once rehydrated they were too large for their original jar, so I transferred them to one of our empty historic jars, mounting them on a new glass backing plate, which I etched with the specimen name and object number.



Frogs from Argentina

The course brought together a diverse group of museum professionals, eager to strengthen their knowledge and exchange ideas. Attendees represented leading museums and collections from Poland, Australia, Ireland, and several other countries, creating a vibrant environment for networking and collaboration. Many participants remarked on the value of sharing challenges and solutions with peers working in different contexts and climates.

Looking to the Future

The success of this course demonstrates the ongoing need for specialist training in natural history conservation. Participants left not only with enhanced skills but also with a renewed commitment to safeguarding their collections

As museums worldwide strive to honour and protect their collections, initiatives like this fluid preservation course are vital. They ensure that the stories and scientific value contained within natural history specimens remain accessible for generations to come.

Volunteer News:

Two of our valued volunteers, Jane Hook and Bridget Featherstone have done amazing work tidying up and revamping the flower beds in front of the museum, which has made a major difference to the appearance and presentation of the museum, when visitors arrive. Jane has kindly donated items to the museum in the past year including a big floor mat for the revamped museum entrance hall/welcome desk, as well as plant pots to go either side of the entrance door. These donations have been very gratefully received. This quarter, Jane, Bridget and June Baker, our brilliant Volunteer Co-ordinator (volunteer) have negotiated a large donation of plants from Beeches Nursery in Ashdon, after Alan Bidwell, who was a specialist plantsman sadly passed away and the family were looking for good homes for the specialist plants. Jane and Bridget are now working on creating a gardening group for the museum and working with museum staff to apply for funding to do further gardening themed development work at the museum.

Would you like to join our team?

The museum could not operate without the help of our valued volunteers. We currently have around 50 volunteers, who fulfil a number of different roles, but we are always looking for more help.

Welcome Desk volunteers

Our Welcome Desk is run entirely by a dedicated team of volunteers during the week. They provide a friendly welcome for visitors, sell tickets and merchandise, provide information about the museum, and direct enquiries to the appropriate member of staff.

They usually volunteer for a 2.5 hour shift, every day except for Mondays

The museum is always looking for volunteers who can fill adhoc shifts, to provide cover for the regular shift volunteers when they are on holiday or off sick.

For more information and to apply contact us by email museum@uttlesford.gov.uk



Exhibitions and Events:

POOCH: An Exhibition Exploring the History of Our Best Friend

25 October 2025 – 12 April 2026

Saffron Walden Museum

Saffron Walden Museum is delighted to announce *POOCH*, a new exhibition opening on **25 October 2025**, celebrating humanity's enduring bond with the dog. Running until **12 April 2026**, the exhibition brings together archaeology, science, folklore, and pop culture to tell the fascinating story of our "best friend."

From the earliest archaeological evidence tracing the evolution of domestic dogs to their role in today's society, *POOCH* invites visitors to explore the many ways dogs have shaped—and been shaped by—human lives.

Highlights include:

- **Archaeological Evidence** – Discover how dogs evolved from wild canids into beloved companions.
- **Comparative Anatomy** – Examine the similarities and differences between dogs and their close relatives in the canidae family.



- **Working Dogs** – Featuring loans from the **Essex Police Museum** and **Guide Dogs UK**, showcasing the vital roles dogs continue to play in service and support.
- **Dogs in Religion, Myth & Legend** – Explore stories of faith and folklore with objects on loan from the **Black Shuck Festival**, shedding light on dogs' symbolic power across cultures.
- **Dogs in Pop Culture** – Experience how dogs have left pawprints on film, television, art, and music.
- **Immersive Installations** – Enjoy audio-visual displays that bring to life the many ways dogs connect with us.

Dogs have been our companions for thousands of years, and this exhibition brings together incredible objects and stories to celebrate that bond. From myth to modern service dogs, POOCH is an exploration of why we call dogs our best friends.

POOCH promises to be an engaging, family-friendly exhibition for dog lovers, history enthusiasts, and anyone curious about the unique relationship between humans and dogs.



Museum Society News

Membership

Although subscriptions have remained at the same level for ten years, I will not propose an increase for 2026-27. You could be forgiven for saying -Phew!

It has been a delight to notice that many members feel able to support the work of the Society by paying a little more than the minimum subscription and the team appreciate this show of confidence.

Recently a huge amount of time has been spent on developing the use of the school room. Come and see at the AGM

If you know of someone who would like to join the Society, application forms may be downloaded from our website www.swmuseumsoc.org.uk. Paper copies are available at the Museum or from the Treasurer

SCS
Nov 25

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
- 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.

Events

The Museum Society is getting together with the Museum staff and volunteers on the afternoon of **Friday 19th December** for an afternoon tea social event, and all Society Members are cordially invited. A chance to meet the staff and regular volunteers, and to discover what they do to keep the museum running, and to maintain the displays and exhibitions.

In the past, before COVID, the Society has usually held a Winter Social event before Christmas each year, though in recent years post COVID this was moved to mid-January, however this will not be held in the coming January. Instead the Society plans to hold a Summer Social in June which can be held outdoors in the Museum's grounds when the weather is more pleasant. Details are still being worked on, but further information will be included in the Spring Newsletter, and Members will be sent emails closer to the date with full details.

2026 Talks Programme

The first evening talk of 2026 will be;

Monday 12th January

"Two Paths, One War"

George Dziedzic will talk about his parents' escape from Poland in World War II and their war service and later life in Stansted Mountfitchet.

Monday 9th February

The Essex Lunatic Asylum

Rachel Bailey-Gibson

The programme for the spring is currently being developed, with one talk per month planned. These will all be live talks in the Museum Schoolroom, and the Society will not be providing on-line talks on 'Zoom'.

Museum Society Annual General Meeting

the Annual General Meeting of
Saffron Walden Museum Society Limited
will be held at

7.00 pm on Friday, 5 December 2025

at The School Room, The Museum Saffron Walden

(It is on the Right Hand Side of the drive, near the entrance gates to the Museum

(some parking available at the Museum)

Refreshments will be available from 6.40 pm.

Members are reminded that only those whose subscriptions are up to date
will be eligible to vote at this meeting

Reports on Talks

8 September 2025

POW Camp 116 Hatfield Heath

Speaker ; Mark Ratcliff

The Camp was, and still is, located in Mill Lane Hatfield Heath. Mark Ratcliff has known it since growing up in the area, but became more interested in its history since retiring. Records are scarce, and the names of people who were held there are not recorded. There were between 450 – 1026 POW camps in the UK at various times during WWII. Prisoners were expected to work, many of them in agriculture, and the preparation of building sites. They also built and maintained their own camp. In December 1945 there were 211,330 prisoners of war nationally. The figure went up by September 1946 to 402,200 because many who had been taken to the USA were returned to Britain, and some were still held until 1948.

The Hatfield Heath camp was built in 1943 with Major Rowland in command. The land was requisitioned from farmers, and was eventually returned to them. The pattern of wooden huts and some brick buildings is visible on large scale maps and aerial photographs from later times. Each POW camp seems to have had associated hostels, and one related to Camp 116 was at Hertford; a Command Supply Depot. Some prisoners were billeted on the farms where they were working. The regime seems to be more like open prisons today rather than fully secure compounds. The British military presence was strengthened by trusted prisoners who ran the day to day matters. The prisoners wore black uniforms with a large red circle on the leg, and the Trustys also had a yellow triangular patch on their sleeve. The camp initially had Italian prisoners but these were replaced by German prisoners by 1944, when there were 536 there. Another satellite camp was at Hill Hall, a large 'stately home', now close to the M25 / M11 junction, where Nissen Huts were used to accommodate the prisoners. In 1946 there were 894 there.

In September 1946 Camp 116 had 961 prisoners, with 48 UK troops as guards and Lt Col Barlow in command. The site had electricity and running water, which many local houses would not have then had, so the standard of accommodation was better than that of local residents, which may have caused some resentment. Generally however there appears to have been no overall sense of animosity, and many friendships developed.

Prisoners seem to have been moved between camps, each had an ID Card, and a Record Card showing where they had been, rather like a passport record, and some of those have survived and come up for sale in auctions. Paper token money was issued to be used in camp. From 1946 letters home were allowed and again some of those have survived and appear in auctions. The Illustrated London News had a photo story about POW Camps, which fortunately featured Camp 116 and showed photos of the exterior and interior of the huts and other buildings, like for example a bakery.

The buildings survived after repatriation of all prisoners and were used for a time in 1949 to house the labourers who were building Harlow New Town. Remarkably, for temporary buildings, some still survive today, though plans have been put forward to remove them and use the land for three substantial houses.

Tony Morton

Monday 13th October

'The Hidden History of Peacemaking during the English Civil Wars'

Speaker; Dr William White, University of Hertfordshire

This talk explored popular agitation for peace during the English Civil Wars. It told the neglected stories of ordinary men and women – from provincial petitioners and pamphleteers to radical soldiers and religious visionaries – who sought remedies to the violent upheaval that engulfed their nation during the 1640s.

Monday 10th November
Tim Turner
What on Earth is that for?

Tim has spent many years collecting weird and wonderful historic objects from his days working at Swords auctioneers and estate agents; things which were discovered when properties were being cleared. A variety of objects and tools had been put away when they went out of use, perhaps replaced by the latest gadget for doing a particular task, but these tools had been useful once, often as the tools of specialist trades like blacksmiths, coopers or carpenters, and Tim mentioned a ladder-maker who had very specialised tools for fitting the rungs to his ladders. The tools are made of a variety of materials; wood, metals and glass for example, and often show signs of repair so that they could continue in use. Wooden items get a smooth polish from years of use, and tools are often light and easy to handle.

Tim had brought a large tableful of objects with him, and these were passed around the audience so that people could guess their purpose, leading to much lively discussion. We were invited to think of the many people who had handled the tools during their life as everyday objects, not as historic curiosities.

Among other tools the audience were able to handle and discover were; a Thatchers Comb, a Twybill, a Wimbrel (not the bird but a tool), a costrel, and special wooden tools used for straightening the dents in pewter mugs.

Tony Morton

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