



# Museum Matters

## Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Summer 2025 Issue 66

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### Highlights and Happenings: From the Chairman

It is always delightful to start off talking about Birthdays and Weddings. The 190th Museum Birthday was, as all of you who visited know, a cracking success. It is fully reported in the pages that follow, just for me to say a Big Thanks all who made the event happen. From our President hosting, and the Kings' representative, Deputy Lord Lieutenant Mrs. Lorna Rolfe who came with a letter from the King which is on display in the Museum, and to Jenny and her staff and volunteers who worked late into the previous evening to achieve a great start to the new exhibition "Wonders".

And the wedding! Special congratulations to my fellow director Douglas Kent and our former Membership Secretary Catherine who married two weeks ago at St Mary's Church followed by a memorable reception at the nearly restored Old Sun Inn. We wish them all the happiness possible.

Turn the page of a full Museum Matters.

### Curator's Column: Jenny Oxley

Michael Davidson joined the team on 28th April as our new Community Engagement Officer, to give us more capacity to deliver additional community events and initiatives in the district. His standard working days are Monday and Tuesday (9-5.30pm) and half day Thursday.

This quarter, refresher training was delivered by the Interim Curator to the casual and weekend teams on Saturdays 17 May and 21 June. For the team, much of this quarter was consumed with preparing for and delivering the 190th birthday exhibition and birthday party bash event.

For National Volunteer week, the team held its annual volunteer thank you tea party. This year the interactive session, was a group ukulele session provided by Michael Davidson, which showed how he has typically delivered music outreach sessions.

## Natural Sciences Officer; James Lombard-Smith

### Hard-working garden volunteers

Two motivated and hard-working museum volunteers are making short work of tidying and planting the flower beds around the museum building. Together we are aiming for a theme of drought-tolerant, naturalised garden plants with a bit of Victorian-style floweriness thrown in. Plants have been donated from volunteers' gardens, with some hangers-on from last year's plant sale. Expect red campion, lavender, tree peony, verberna and Erigeron daisies.



### Collections work

The Museum looks forward to welcoming Simon Moore from 15th-18th September when we are acting as the venue for his fluid specimen conservation course. Attendees from museums across the country will learn how to clean, repair and refill natural history items stored in spirit jars by working on Saffron Walden Museum's own fluid collection. This is a fantastic chance to bring an overlooked portion of our collection up to standard for display and long-term preservation.



### Natural Sciences Officer away on secondment

With mixed emotions, I would like to share that I will be stepping away from museum duties for 18 months as I take up a secondment opportunity within Uttlesford District Council as Climate Change Project Officer, beginning 15th September. I will be helping develop and deliver projects to promote and support active travel, improve air quality and reduce the Council's carbon emissions as well as sharing information on the work, planning events and celebrating progress. In the meantime, I will be busy wrapping up grant-funded environmental work at the Museum and bringing ongoing work together for a smooth handover!



## The Museum's 190<sup>th</sup> Birthday



On a fine sunny Saturday, the 10<sup>th</sup> May, the Museum celebrated its 190<sup>th</sup> birthday with a new exhibition, 'Wonders: 190 Years Of Saffron Walden Museum' (10 May – October 2025) featuring items from the collections, many chosen by local societies and organisations, showing the broad range of the artefacts that the museum has in its collections, with free access for the day.

The opening of the exhibition was accompanied by a range of stalls displaying local heritage craft demonstrations, with a lively music tent, and food stalls, and attracted over 350 visitors throughout the day for the museum's "Big Birthday Bash" on Saturday 10th May. The event was attended by the Deputy Lieutenant of Essex, and the museum was honoured with a letter from King Charles III (now on display in the exhibition). The forthcoming summer holiday activities are designed around the exhibition, and ongoing digital and print media publicity is being undertaken.



This exhibition commemorates the 190th anniversary of the Saffron Walden Museum along with its distinguished collections. The exhibition showcases a curiosity cabinet containing items selected by the public, educational institutions, community groups, and individuals associated with the District Council and various organisations. In total, the museum garnered over 2000 votes and facilitated visits to schools throughout the district. The cabinet is further complemented by a narrative timeline that demonstrates the museum's evolution, its connections to the district and the nation, the building and its ongoing redevelopment, the Council and the Museum Society, museum design, and the significance of the museum's collection on both a national and international level. The exhibition received local press and regional television coverage.



*Part of the cabinet of curiosities*

If you have seen posters advertising the Exhibition you may have noticed that many different images were shown on them. If you wondered how many different variations there were, the following photographs show them all from a display pinned up on the wall of the schoolroom.



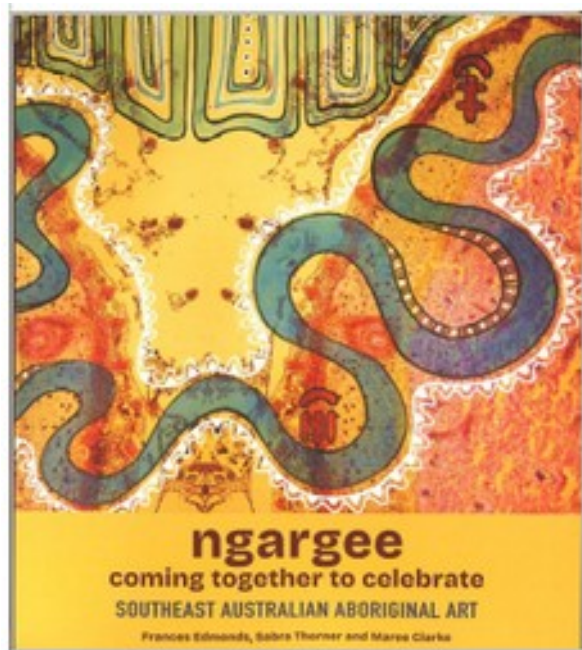
### Collections Officer, Human History: Simon Hilton-Smith

I am surprised it's already time for another newsletter. Has it really been three months? As always, the museum and human history team stay busy, answering enquiries, planning the next exhibition, conducting audits, and collaborating with visiting researchers. We have recently hosted two particularly interesting visits, both from abroad. The first was a researcher from the University of Wisconsin. We spent a whole day examining the beautifully delicate weaving of the Plains Indians of the Eastern United States. We held a Zoom call with elders and noted weavers from inside the World Cultures Gallery, analysing moose hair, porcupine quills, and other natural fibres. The elders from the USA were impressed by the quality and condition of our collection, noticing minute details, intricate patterns, and uncovering the stories and processes behind the objects so often seen only behind glass.

Our second visitor came to explore our collection donated by John Helder Wedge in the 1830s. The central part of the Wedge collection originates from Southeast Australia, although the original labels mention Van Diemen's Land, where Wedge was the first government surveyor. Wedge's history and time in what is now Tasmania took place during a dark period of Australian and colonial history, though Wedge himself has never been implicated in any wrongdoing; his presence serves as a symbol of indigenous disruption and relates to ongoing questions of Land Rights in Australia and Tasmania. Nonetheless, Wedge did collect objects made by the people of Southeast Australia and other regions through trade and gifts, creating a material record of their designs and forms, which interested Dr Frances Edmonds. Dr Edmonds works with the tribes of Southeast Australia, rediscovering patterns and techniques of decoration, as well as observing the continuation of these traditions, which have been transferred across media into modern formats, mainly acrylic paint on canvas and textiles.

It is these visitors, their work, and stories that make the collections of Saffron Walden Museum so fascinating and renowned worldwide. The museum serves as a guardian of a repository of knowledge, allowing the continuation of traditions and the understanding of processes and meanings that have slipped into obscurity, been lost and forgotten, yet remain in a material form. Our incredible collection enables indigenous people from all over the world to unwrap and rediscover their traditions, and to understand how these traditions, rather than disappearing, have often become woven into other forms and developed into new expressions of modernity and identity. Every day, I feel proud to help preserve all our collections for future generations and to share their secrets and knowledge with all who ask.

Now I really should get to planning the next exhibition with Charlotte.



*A book by Dr Frances Edmonds and others that examines the diversity of Aboriginal art from Southeast Australia, along with the ongoing traditions and knowledge of the people in the region*



## Acquisitions and Disposals

There have been 9 new acquisitions received this quarter: (Archaeology/Human History: 8; Natural Sciences: 1)

- Metal detecting finds under the Portable Antiquities Scheme (Treasure Act 1996), finders' and landowners' fees paid for by the Museum Society. This quarter included an Early Medieval silver ingot from Elmdon, c. AD 850-950. Treasure reference number 2020 T807. ESS-D7956E. Roughly cut at the ends, smooth hammered, incomplete.
- Archaeological units seeking accession numbers in advance of their excavations being completed, to organise deposition of their finds and archive records. This quarter these related to developments in Great Dunmow, Takeley, Elsenham and Chesterford Research Park.
- Document archive from Gibson Library of research into life of the Victorian geologist Edward Charlesworth who spent his last years in Saffron Walden and contributed to the Museum's catalogues (these Charlesworth documents were the subject of a talk delivered by one of our volunteers, Dominic Davey in June at the Gibson Library.
- Fragment of Berlin Wall.

## Collections Projects, Care & Conservation

Review work and storage improvements continue on the world cultures and natural sciences collections.

We have been working through delivering the Rural Tourism grant, and our current MDSE grant projects for income generation, Climate Change ("Towards Net Zero" and the "SERM Community Energy" project) and the Access Improvement grant (new internal and external signage for the museum).

## Loans Out

- Colchester and Ipswich Museums (CIMS) have requested to borrow the Gladiator frieze which is currently on display in the museum's Great Hall archaeology displays.
- We have loaned out pargetting stamps and the wooden long house model to Clare Ancient House Museum in Suffolk for their exhibition 'The Ancient House: Past, Present and Future'.
- We continue to work through reviewing our historic loan out agreements across all collections.

## Object of the Month

May 2025

**'Tudor' bedframe**

May's Object of the Month fits perfectly with our "Wonders" theme of the Museum's current exhibition to celebrate it's 190<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Donated by William Murray Tuke in 1882, it was believed to be "an enigmatic Tudor bed frame," or worse a "Victorian assemblage of disparate parts". But the Regional Furniture Society's latest radiocarbon data has shown for the first time that it is a very rare Plantagenet bed (15th century). What a lovely 190th birthday present for the museum!! Even 190 years on there are always new things to discover! These findings give us the evidence needed to help fund and produce historically accurate bedding for the frame, so it can be appreciated by generations to come



## June 2025 Pliosaur's Vertebra

June's star object is a fossilised vertebra from a pliosaur's spinal column. At the museum, we usually see ichthyosaur vertebrae, which are usually quite small, flat and round – often compared to an ice hockey puck, with a dish-shaped hollow on both sides. This pliosaur vertebra is much bigger and more strongly built, pictured next to a mug for scale. The difference in shape is due to the animals' different swimming styles. Ichthyosaurs had a flexible backbone with lots of small vertebrae, as they moved their tails side-to-side to swim, like sharks. Pliosaur were heavy-bodied animals which swam using large flippers, like turtles, and did not need such a flexible backbone. Ichthyosaurs and pliosaurs existed together alongside dinosaurs but belonged to their own groups within the reptiles, distinct from each other and from dinosaurs.



## July 2025 1943 British Machete

The object of the month is a 1943 British military machete, which was issued to the Long Range Penetration Groups overseen by Brigadier Wingate. These groups became known as the Chindits after the Chinthe, a guardian of temples in Burmese mythology. The Chindits were a multicultural force comprising men from Myanmar, Nepal, and even the King's Liverpool regiment, which largely consisted of older men. These men would penetrate the deep jungle and strike from behind enemy lines, disrupting communications and supply routes.



1943 World War II Japanese Aeronautical Map of Burma (Myanmar) - Geographicus - Burma7-wwii-1943

This year marks 80 years of relative peace in Europe. However, we now face a deepening crisis, not only in Europe but across the globe. I thought it important to remind ourselves of the horrors of war and the sacrifices made by those who have defended our shores and upheld our ideals of justice. May saw us celebrate VE Day, while June 6th marked 81 years since D-Day, and on August 25th, an often overlooked theatre of war—the East Asian campaigns—commemorates 80 years since the cessation of hostilities.

In 1943, the British military was engaged in a guerrilla-style war in the dense jungles of Myanmar, endeavouring to prevent the Japanese from entering India. Following the fall of Singapore, this theatre represented Britain's sole hope of holding the Japanese at bay while a larger force could be assembled from the imperial troops in India.

The success of the Chindits was limited in disrupting Japanese infrastructure, but in terms of propaganda, the Chindit forces became famous and a symbol of hope in a darkening world. The men endured great hardships, suffering from disease and dysentery, and, if captured, the threat of internment in a Japanese POW camp or death.

After the first Chindit campaign in 1943, numerous changes were made to the training, equipment, and structure of the group. With the arrival of reinforcements and the American disruption of the Japanese army, the Chindits achieved success by striking from behind enemy lines, disrupting communications, and denying the Japanese the security needed to advance towards India. This machete was among the first to be standard issue for a British army unit. It found its place in a multicultural team working together to defend themselves and us.

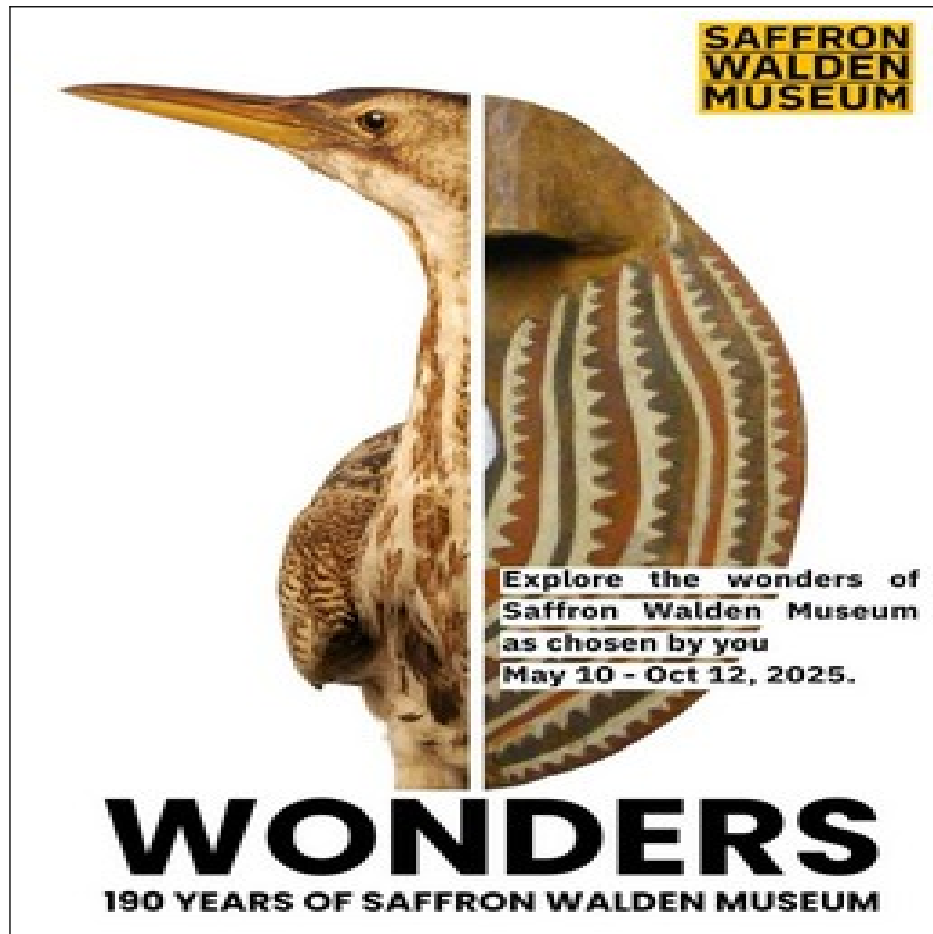
The fighting in Asia continued beyond the end of World War II. The British never fought alone during the war years, with servicemen coming from all over, and upon their return, these same servicemen sought to enact significant social changes. In the United Kingdom, the Labour party gained power in the 1945 election, leading to the establishment of the NHS. Meanwhile, in India and other colonies in Asia, various independence movements made progress, culminating in India and Pakistan's independence in 1947, followed by Myanmar and Sri Lanka in 1948, Malaysia in 1957, and Singapore in 1959.

This machete was created during a moment of change, forged in war, formed at the height of British imperial power and within a conflict that would lead to widespread social change worldwide, shifting power dynamics and the rise of newly independent states. While British power waned, the incoming Queen Elizabeth II and her government sought to establish a supportive network based on cooperation and shared interests: the Commonwealth, a collection of 56 countries, many linked by a shared history, continues to this day.



The British Empire has a stormy history as both hero and villain, peacemaker and warmonger, we must not forget that in the decline of the imperial dream, a hopeful, peaceful amalgamation based on cooperation and equality was born. Whilst we celebrate the end of war, perhaps we should remember to celebrate a foundation based on humanity: Commonwealth Day is every May the 24th.

## Exhibitions and Events: Current Exhibition



## Looking Ahead: Planning for Our Next Major Exhibition

As WONDERS celebrates the Museum's remarkable past, I am already looking to the future with preparations well underway for our next temporary exhibition: "Pooch – Exploring the History of Our Best Friend" running from October 2025 – April 2026. Dogs have been by our side for thousands of years — as hunters, herders, guardians, companions, and family members. Our next exhibition, Pooch, will take an engaging and community-focused look at this enduring bond. Using a variety of lenses — archaeological, biological, cultural, and social — Pooch will explore the significance of dogs throughout history and into the present day. The exhibition will draw on the Museum's rich collections and will include:

- Archaeological evidence of early canine-human relationships
- Historical artefacts and personal stories
- Community contributions, oral histories, and photos
- Collaborations with local dog owners, trainers, and welfare groups
- Interactive and child-friendly displays

The Museum team is especially keen to involve the community in shaping this exhibition. If you, or someone you know, has a story, object, or memory connected to a beloved dog, there will be opportunities to get involved later this year.





# Learning at Saffron Walden Museum: Charlotte Pratt

## Education, Events and Outreach : Art for Good project

Students from Colchester Institute created family-friendly murals at Saffron Walden Museum. The art and design students visited the museum in June to complete their "Art for Good" work experience project. They were tasked with creating murals for the museum's public toilet spaces. The aim of the murals was to make the museum's spaces more welcoming to families by promoting hope and positivity. Aeron Hall-Apps, course leader of Level 3 Art and Design at Colchester Institute, said that, 'This project was a great opportunity to apply the work we develop in college to a real-life situation'. The students took to the theme of music as a source of wellbeing, and those chosen to create the murals were so enthusiastic about having their work displayed in public. The students gathered ideas for the murals by researching the idea of visualising music and its positive effects on wellbeing. Each student submitted a mural design, and the museum selected two to be developed further. On 9th June, the students came together at the museum to create the murals, supported by fellow student artists. As well as the murals, their screen prints are now on display in the museum foyer.

## Looking Ahead: A Busy and Inspiring Summer at the Museum

The summer of 2025 is shaping up to be WONDEROUS! We have an exciting line-up of activities for children and families throughout the school holidays — all inspired by our current special exhibition, WONDERS: 190 Years of Saffron Walden Museum. This landmark exhibition, running from 10 May to 12 October, celebrates nearly two centuries of collecting and community engagement. With objects selected by the people of Uttlesford, WONDERS showcases some of the most extraordinary items in the Museum's collections, reminding us of the many ways in which museums continue to fascinate and inspire.

## Summer Holiday Workshops – Creativity, Curiosity and Community

Our popular holiday workshops are back, offering hands-on experiences for young visitors. All activities are family-friendly and linked to our WONDERS exhibition. Here's what's on offer:

Wed 30 July – Wonderkammer

Children can build their own miniature museum in a wooden frame, filled with tiny treasures and pictures, inspired by the historic "cabinets of curiosity."

Thu 31 July – Fossil Painting

Young artists can paint plaster fossil replicas and explore the world of prehistoric creatures.

Sat 19 August – Finds Surgery

Visitors can bring archaeological finds for identification and recording with the Essex Finds Liaison Officer.

➤ Book via: [calendly.com/pasessex](https://calendly.com/pasessex)

Wed 13 August – Paper Eggs

Inspired by natural history collections, this workshop invites children to decorate 3D paper eggs.

Thu 14 August – Samurai Helmet

Kids can create wearable samurai helmets and masks, learning about the history of Japanese warriors.

Wed 20 August – Model Ammonite

A chance to build a large-scale ammonite model and learn about these fascinating ancient sea creatures.

Thu 21 August – Bird Masks

Children can craft colourful paper bird masks inspired by feathers and patterns in nature.

Wed 27 August – Plant Stamps

Participants will design plant-themed stamps from funky foam and use them to create nature-inspired prints.

These workshops are a fantastic way to engage families, promote creativity, and connect new audiences with the Museum's collections and exhibitions. Please share our summer program with anyone who might enjoy coming, or needs something to entertain their children and grandchildren!



## Museum Society News

### Membership

#### Members' subscriptions

Thank you to all who paid their subscriptions promptly. There are a few who have yet to pay, and reminders have been issued. Please deal with this promptly to save further admin.

If you would like to pay on-line, please contact Christine by phone 01799 527546 or by email [s.christinesharpe@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:s.christinesharpe@hotmail.co.uk) for the Society bank details.

Cheques made out to Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd are not a problem, we can even cope with cash. These should preferably be sent to the Museum marked Society Membership. Despite a problematic upgrade at the bank we can still put money into our account!

If you know of someone who would like to join the Society, application forms may be downloaded from our website [swmuseumsoc.org.uk](http://swmuseumsoc.org.uk). Paper copies are available at the Museum.

SCS

Simon Hilton-Smith, Membership Officer

Hello, back again in a different role. For those who don't know me, I am the current Collections Assistant at the museum. After several weeks of negotiations, I am now able to take on the role of Membership Officer for the Museum Society, a position I am very excited about. However, there are some restrictions on when I can

handle Museum Society business due to my responsibilities at the museum. I can only respond to emails and enquiries outside my office hours, which are Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5:30 pm. Aside from that, I am fully dedicated to the society. You can still drop in your subscriptions to the museum, of course, and why not say hello while you're here? I hope I can serve both the society and the museum well in this role, ensuring that both continue to thrive in the future.

### 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.

## Reports on Talks

### The History of the Saffron Walden Museum Society.

**Tony Watson, President,  
14th April 2025.**

This talk was a prelude to the Birthday Bash to be held on the 10th May 2025. The presentation was a mix of slides of detailed dates of the story of the Museum Buildings from 1835 through to the present time and photographs from the Museum's archives and some from the Uttlesford District Council.

It began with the details of the creation of the Saffron Walden Natural History Society in 1832, which led to the building of the Museum and its opening on the 12th May 1835. The story of the progress through the 19th Century was told with details of the first curators of the Museum, all members of the Maynard family. Following two world wars the museum was in financial difficulty and led to the creation of the Saffron Walden Museum Society in 1958. This enabled funding by the Saffron Walden Borough Council and Essex Council to provide for re-developments of displays and the employment of Curators. Slides included photographs of the interior of the museum prior to the world wars and the battle ditches (or correctly Town ditch) which was excavated in 1959. Included was the story of the elephant, lent to the Great Exhibition in 1951 and removed by the owner Jeremy Fry in 1960, with a photograph of the elephant loaded on a lorry during its removal.

This led to the creation of the Uttlesford District Council in 1974, and in April 1975 the creation of the partnership management between the Society and the Council. Fifty years later this still exists. During the last fifty years the museum has progressed, two curators of long service were recorded, Len Pole, appointed in 1974, and Carolyn Wingfield in 2000.

The major re-developments were described, the opening of the ethnography gallery by David Attenborough, the re-development of the Great Hall in the 1980's, and not least the creation of the Museum Store in Shire Hill in 2014.

Finally, the more recent history was described, the proposals for re-development of the museum, obtaining funds from the Lottery for detailed plans for an extension and other alterations, all this coming to an end following COVID closure and increasing building costs and lack of funding available from the local authority. Details of the present position were explained and the proposals for a plan for the ten years before the 200th Anniversary in 2035.

One hundred and ninety years of history in under an hour was given, and all this history has been recorded in an article in the Spring edition of the Saffron Walden Historical Journal, copies available in the Museum.

**Tony Watson**



**12 May 2025 – Hadstock: its Sustainability Initiative**  
**Speakers: John Lockton & Tony Morton**

There is evidence of dwellings in Hadstock from Roman times. The current village was probably formed around the Church of St Botolph in 1020, possibly by Cnut to mark the battle of Assandun.

The church is believed to have the oldest functioning door in Britain.

Over the years Hadstock has changed considerably in response to the threats of wars, our changing economy and the needs of its residents.



The Parish Council identified that Climate Change was a significant current threat and setup an initiative to look at what could be done locally to both reduce carbon consumption in our homes and increase nature and biodiversity across the Parish.

Sustainable Hadstock was launched in March 2024 with support from an Uttlesford District Council Zero Carbon grant, and has been recognised as a great example of how to deliver such an initiative in a village setting.

The project began with a questionnaire delivered to every household, and subsequently collected back, with an over 80% response rate, showing the top concerns were energy saving and protecting wildlife. These two themes form the core of the project, with 40 houses having had an energy assessment. If all the respondents proceed with the recommended measures the village would move from an average energy rating of D to a C.

The wildlife project has carried out a Phase 1 Habitat Survey of the entire parish resulting in a digital map showing the location of areas with a value for wildlife, forming a network of habitats which it is hoped to improve. The first step will be improvements to the Village Recreation Ground.

More information:

[www.hadstock.org.uk/sustainablehadstock/](http://www.hadstock.org.uk/sustainablehadstock/)

**Tony Morton**

**16 June 2025**

**Thunderstones, Elves Arrows and Pre-historic Stone Tools**

**Speaker Judith Rodden**

Judith began by showing us a stone tool dated at circa 400,000 years old, a Hand Axe made of flint. These objects have been found throughout subsequent history, but for a long time people thought that they had fallen from the sky, and were connected in some way with thunderstorms and lightning. This idea still survives in parts of our modern world, and Judith recounted her experience in Ghana where these stones were still being sold as protection against lightning strikes, with the stallholder who was selling them repeating the story told millennia ago by Pliny, who said there were two kinds of thunderstones; red and black, which he said were never to be found in a place that had not been struck by lightning. Pliny's writings were first printed in 1492, and his ideas were then often repeated in following centuries. A woodcut of 1517 shows thunderstones falling from the sky. As late as 1909 a published study of thunderstones collected rural stories of belief in their protective powers against lightning. There is a large collection of them in the Pitt-Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Fairy Arrows are flint arrowheads which were often found, and were associated with witchcraft, especially in Scotland. Some were mounted in silver and worn as a charm. In 1858 a minister of the Free Kirk of Scotland collected 3 creels of fairy arrows and threw them into Dunvegan loch. The memory of their actual use to tip arrows had been forgotten.

However, alternative explanations were also offered. In 1565 Conrad Gesner published 'A Book of Fossil Objects' with illustrations, and he described hand axes as tools. A History of Warwickshire by William Drydale dated 1656 has an engraving of a stone tool which he thought was made by the Ancient Britons. So there was a recognition that these were human-made objects.

Discovery and exploration of the New World also changed opinions, with Native American tools becoming collectors objects, especially in Italy. Stone axes and arrow heads from there showed a comparison with the more ancient artefacts that had been found in Europe. Aztec tools were also collected and a book of 1648 by Ulysse Adrovandi, 'Museum Metallicum' showed these. Spanish exploration of central and south America found these stone tools. The New World was a focus of interest in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries trying to explain the origin of the peoples who lived there and understand their lives.

Flint was of course still used in East Anglia as a building material, with churches often showing high quality knapped flint that was used to make decorative patterns in walls. From the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century knapped flint was used as gunflints in early firearms, so the older superstitious ideas about stone tools persisted alongside more modern uses.

Thunderstones have inspired artists in recent times; Michael Heizer in 1990 sculpted a hand axe stone tool which was 138cm long.

**Tony Morton**

## **Who to contact ...**

### **Museum Society**

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### **Museum**

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