



Museum Matters

Newsletter of Saffron Walden Museum Society Ltd

Spring 2026 Issue 68

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Highlights and Happenings: From the Chairman

It has always been my belief that it should all start with optimism and my closing remarks in the Autumn 2025 Museum Matters read "We expect to know in the new year which Unitary Authority we Are destined to live with".

It is Amazing we have just found out we will become part of West Essex Council one of the 5 Unitary Authorities. WEUA (as it might referred to) will be an amalgamation of UDC, Epping Forest District Council and Harlow Council. We do not at this stage know what this means for the Museum, but we shall find out over the coming months.

Therefore, we should not worry as Jenny reports below the Museum is humming and its all-good news. The short-term renovation of the Schoolroom has been a success and for those of you who have attended our last three Talks will have seen we have close to full houses. We have now even invested in cushions to place on for the seats! Thanks to our three successful Speakers and to all those who have made this success happen.

We are pressing ahead with our Development Plans the first stage is the full redevelopment of the Schoolroom. My thanks go to President Tony Watson for chairing this group as they will shortly looking for builders to work with. As we plan to rent the rooms to outside organisation do not be surprised if there are additional regulations, we must comply with this, meaning more time and money needed.

Uttlesford District Council are planning a major refurbishment of the Museum building under their lease, and we are now putting in place plans to link that to our proposed redevelopment that we hope to have agreed next year.

The poet was right; there are still reasons to be cheerful!

Museum Manager's Column: Jenny Oxley

We're currently enjoying the sunshine and building up to the Easter holidays. Behind the scenes it's been finance year end, so it feels good to emerge from budget spreadsheets and staff performance reviews, to start off on a new financial year with the excitement of all we can deliver over the next year. At the time of writing, we seem on track to have had our busiest year (2025-'26) with around 20,000 users, up from 19,000 last year and 14,500 the previous financial year. 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.

On the 3rd January, we welcomed Ghost Hunt UK to the museum to do an overnight paranormal investigation in the museum. They were busy from 6pm-1am running their investigations in teams all around the galleries. If you would like to join them they're back in June for a repeat investigation. The popularity of this venue hire has led to other paranormal investigation groups booking in too later this year.

February half-term, saw the team deliver family activities themed around the current exhibition, Pooch led by Charlotte our Learning & Outreach Officer, and the introduction of Family Music sessions run by Michael, our Community Engagement Officer.

There's still time to see our current canine themed temporary exhibition, POOCH, before it closes on the 26th April. We had a special dog day on the 21st March led by Simon, where visitors brought their dogs in to do a special trail around the museum, this was really successful attracting new audiences to the museum, and shall be run again in the easter holidays on the 7th April. I should imagine specific dog days may well become a legacy of the exhibition and be added to our regular programme of events.

From the 1st April, we are raising the museum admission charges. The adult admission will be £5.00 up from £2.50. Concessions will be £2.50 and children remain free to visit. Consider joining Museum Society as a member or sign up for a museum season ticket to benefit from discounted access. We also accept lots of free/discount passes and we will continue to hold our free admission open weekend days in September for the Heritage Open Day festival.

Behind the scenes, there have been some staffing changes since the previous newsletter. My role has been confirmed as Museum Manager, having been Interim Curator since October 2023, when Carolyn Wingfield retired. Charlotte Pratt, our Learning & Outreach Officer is being seconded to the Natural Sciences Officer role, as James Lumbard-Smith has been seconded to the Uttlesford District Council Climate Change team, from September 2025, until March 2027. Jessica Holbrook, our Museum Support Officer is sadly leaving us on the 10th April for family reasons, so you may have seen we have been recruiting for a replacement for her, as well as someone to backfill Charlotte's Learning & Outreach Officer post until March 2027.

The archaeological work continues to stream in, with treasure case finds and archaeological depositions from the archaeology units. So 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.

Michael has registered the museum on Frontline, which is an online platform which highlights the wellbeing work the museum does, and will help us get referrals from social prescribers for members of the public, who would benefit from accessing the museum as a health and wellbeing activity.

We've been busy supporting Berden with their National Lottery Heritage Funded project, which is running this year, celebrating their parish history and helping to preserve it for future generations to enjoy. We now have a number of organisations hiring out the museum's schoolroom building at the bottom of the drive, when it's not in use for the Museum Society talks or school sessions. If your company or organisation would like to hire it for your events, email us for more details at museum@uttlesford.gov.uk

Our successful partnership with Cardboard Clues, to put on an immersive murder mystery app game in the museum, "Murder in the Museum" is continuing to attract new users to the museum, increasing dwell time and encouraging retail spend. It's free for us to run and the museum gets a cut of the income from the games running at the museum. We've extended the Cardboard Clues partnership again, and hope in early Summer to launch a new version of the murder mystery app game with them here to encourage more repeat visits from those who

have played the game to date, over 400 teams! 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.

Jane Hook, one of our valued volunteers has established a gardening group at the museum in time for the sunnier months, monthly on Fridays. The Museum Society are kindly funding some of the materials needed to get the group off the ground! Gardening is such a great wellbeing activity! If you would like to join this group, please email the museum museum@uttlesford.gov.uk titling your email 'Gardening group' and we will pass on your interest to Jane.

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

Learning at Saffron Walden Museum: Charlotte Pratt

The Saffron Walden Museum has delivered a fantastic range of holiday activities over recent months inspired by our temporary exhibition "POOCH". The events are great for bringing families into the museum to get creative and engage with its collections.

During the October half term, young visitors embraced the spooky season with a Black Shuck Mask workshop (29 October), followed by a spooky peg doll craft session on 30 October. February half-term continued the theme, with the popular Black Shuck Shadow Puppet activity offering imaginative, hands-on fun through a series of short sessions across the day.

More recently, the museum hosted its very first Dog Friendly Day on 21 March, which proved a great success. The special sniff trail for canine companions was enthusiastically received, attracting 41 four-legged visitors and their owners. Following such a positive response, another dog-friendly day is already being planned for the Easter holidays.

Looking ahead, an exciting programme of Easter activities will once again take place at the museum.

On Tuesday 31 March, children can take part in Egg Box Bunny Portraits, creating their own springtime characters. Sessions will run in 30-minute slots between 10:10am–12:40pm and 2:00pm–2:30pm, priced at £2.40 per child.

On Wednesday 1 April, we have an Easter Hat/Bonnet workshop. These 1.5-hour sessions, at 10:10am and 2:00pm, give children the chance to design and decorate their own festive headwear, priced at £7.50 per child.

On Wednesday the 8th young visitors can try their hand at sculpting their very own four-legged friend to create a 3D pooch portrait. This is another one of our longer sessions last 1.5hrs and priced at £7.50

The Museum looks forward to seeing families—and perhaps a few more canine visitors—enjoying everything the museum has to offer in the coming months.

Object of the Month

December 2025

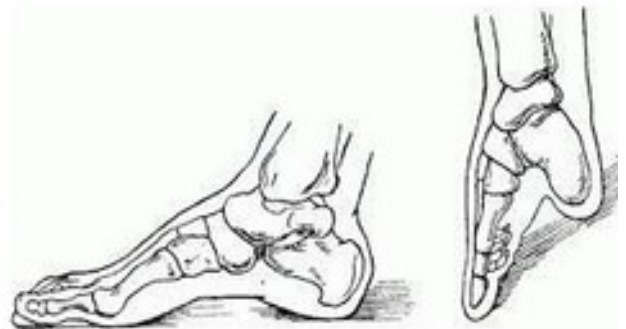
Lotus Shoes – Chinese Foot Binding



Foot-binding was a traditional practice that originated in 10th century China, among court dancers and high society women. By the 12th century it was a widespread practice. In the early 19th century it was estimated that five to eight women out of every ten in China (taking into account regional variations) had bound feet. It eventually spread through all social classes and while it was outlawed in 1912, it continued in some rural areas for years afterwards. A census taken in 1928 in rural Shanxi found that 18% of women had bound feet, while in some remote rural areas such as the Yunnan Province, foot-binding continued to be practiced until the 1950s. In most parts of China, the practice had virtually disappeared by 1949. In 1999, the last lotus shoe-making closed.

The museum has around 14 pairs of Chinese lotus shoes associated with foot binding. They typically have wedge heels, pointed upturned toes which extend beyond the sole and stiffened ankles. The embroidered uppers of the shoes have been beautifully crafted in silk and metallic threads, with embellishments – usually gold braid, beading and sequins.

The foot-binding practice involved plunging the feet into hot water and massaging them with oil. Then all the toes, except for the big ones, were broken and bound flat against the sole, to produce a triangular shape. The arch of the foot was strained as the foot was bent double. The feet were bound in place using a silk strip measuring 10ft long and 2 inches wide. These wrappings were briefly removed every 2 days to prevent blood and pus from infecting the foot. Sometimes “excess” flesh was cut away or encouraged to rot. Over time the wrappings became tighter and the shoes became smaller as the heel and sole were crushed together. After 2 years the process was complete and the feet were most probably numb, with a deep cleft in the sole that could hold a coin in place. Once a foot had been crushed and bound, the shape could not be reversed without undergoing the same pain all over again. This practice was usually undertaken on the feet of a young girl, aged between 3 and 11 years, as their feet would have been softer and easier to manipulate. It was usually carried out by the child’s grandmother.





This painful practice was associated with beauty, status and marriage eligibility. Having tiny feet was considered sexually attractive, emphasising a masculine Chinese view at that time of a woman's inferiority and weakness. It was believed that girls who had their feet bound would be able to attract better marriage offers because of their tiny feet. In wealthy families, the feet of all the daughters would have been bound but in poorer families, the practice might only have been carried out on the eldest daughter, as they had the best chance of making a good marriage union. The ideal length of the foot – the “golden lotus” was deemed to be just three inches!

January 2026 The Great Easton Lodge Loss

The fire of 1847 at Great Easton Lodge destroyed some of the most remarkable Roman artefacts ever discovered locally. They originated from lavish burials under mounds of Romano-British aristocrats at Bartlow Hills, on the Essex/Cambridgeshire border. There were 7 barrows originally, including a 15m high one, believed to be the tallest Roman barrow in western Europe.

Early investigations of one of the barrows appear to have been proposed by Sir Busick Harwood (1750-1814), a Cambridge physician. Excavations of the barrows were done between 1832-1840, by John Gage (Rokewood) for the landowner Henry, Viscount Maynard of Easton Lodge near Dunmow.

Fortunately, the finds from the excavations had been illustrated and published, so we can see the luxury goods which accompanied the dead. Saffron Walden Museum holds the original illustrations, as well as large watercolour copies, produced by the museum's first professional curator, George Nathan Maynard (not related to Viscount Maynard). The finds included a bronze sphinx-handled flagon (replicas were produced and can be seen at the British Museum and Alnwick Castle), a bronze enamelled “miniature cauldron,” an iron folding chair, strigils, a glass urn and pottery vessels.

The Bartlow Hills site is a scheduled monument and can be accessed via public footpaths from the Bartlow-Ashdon road and Bartlow parish church.





This month's featured item is a French heavy cavalry sword from the Battle of Waterloo. Used by French cuirassiers during the late Napoleonic Wars, it has a straight, sharply pointed blade reinforced with two fullers, or grooves, that provide additional stiffness without adding weight. The cuirassiers, named after their metal breastplates and heavy helmets, contrasted with British heavy cavalry, who wore various helmet styles. Dressed in dark blue uniforms and mounted on large, heavy horses, they aimed to break enemy infantry lines by charging at full speed, wielding this powerful blade with its point aimed straight ahead, driven by their muscular charge.

The sword itself is the outcome of years of technological and theoretical development, designed to support the French way of fighting and informed by the estoc of the late medieval/Renaissance period, a straight-bladed sword with little edge, used to thrust through armour. The swords were no good for slashing, and Napoleon himself was said to have told the cavalry to charge with the point rather than sabre (slashing cuts).

The Battle of Waterloo, to the British and many others, is probably the most famous battle fought during the Napoleonic and French Revolutionary wars (1792-1815), which saw the rise and fall of Napoleon and French power on the continent and across the globe. The wars were fought across Europe and into Russia, in Egypt, and in the Newly formed United States and the Seas of the Caribbean and beyond.

Waterloo was the final battle and the culmination of the 'Hundred Days', when Napoleon returned to France from exile, gathered troops, and marched through France once again to threaten the kingdoms of Europe. Napoleon faced a coalition of many states and principalities that had opposed him before. This was known as the Seventh Coalition. They quickly mobilised their forces and marched to meet the old enemy. After several smaller battles, where Napoleon hoped to stop the allies of the Seventh Coalition from joining forces, notably at Quatre-Bras, where he fought the British and allied forces, including soldiers from the Netherlands, Hanover, Brunswick and other smaller states, and at Ligny, where Napoleon fought the Prussians but failed to destroy the Prussian force, which retreated in good order.





On the 17th of June, the commander of the allied forces, Sir Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, gathered his forces and placed them in battle order on the slopes of Mont-Saint-Jean, an escarpment that crossed the road to Brussels. Here he and his men spent a wet night, waiting for Napoleon's arrival.

Napoleon arrived on the 18th and attacked the British and allied forces throughout the day, with prolonged artillery fire and charges by infantry and the heavy cavalry of the French forces, the Cuirassiers. These massive horses, ridden by men with shining breast plates, helmets and heavy, large, pointed swords, charged again and again.

Saffron Walden Museum opened in 1835, 20 years after the Battle of Waterloo (1815), and would be proud of the British Army, Wellington, and the final showdown between England and France. It holds items from the Napoleonic Wars, including swords, uniforms, and a lock of Napoleon's hair.

March 2026 Two Toads in a Jar

These two toads are classified as wet or fluid specimens. They have been in the collection for over 100 years and have recently been conserved and re-displayed. But what is the benefit of preserving specimens in this way, and how is it done?

Fluid-preserved specimens are plants or animals (either whole or part of) that are preserved in a liquid storage medium. The fluid acts as a preservative, which stabilises the specimen and stops it from decaying. Fluid preservation has the advantage of preserving the entire organism, so it can also be dissected for anatomical studies.

The preservative solution and the storage container create a protective and stable environment. If maintained well, fluid-preserved specimens should last for hundreds of years. However, if not maintained, this protective environment can fail. If this happens, the specimens can dry out and get damaged. This is the condition that the toads were in before conservation.

Last year, the museum was delighted to host the world-renowned natural history conservator Simon Moore for a four-day fluid specimen course. During this course, a range of wet specimens were conserved to preserve them for the future. To find out about the process, visit the museum in March and take a look at the object of the month display.



Exhibitions and Events:



life.

Celebrating 100 years of David Attenborough
09/05/2026 - 06/09/2026

**SAFFRON
WALDEN
MUSEUM** Saffron Walden Museum
Museum street
saffron Walden CB10 1BN
www.saffronwaldenmuseum.org

Museum Society News

A kind donation

The Museum Society has been contacted by the East Anglian Traction Engine Society, a Registered Charity that has been organising steam and vintage events in our region for 70 years.

Since 2015, the Society has organised the Saffron Walden Crank Up, a steam and vintage vehicle show that is held annually at Carver Barracks (former RAF Debden) in April. Details of the show may be found here: www.swcrankup.co.uk.

They say, "Our 2025 event was very successful, and we are looking to share our good fortune with other local charities by making donations in line with our environmental policies and charitable aims and objectives.

I'm pleased to be able to inform you that our committee has agreed that we should offer your organisation a donation of £400 to support you in your endeavours.

Michael Pumfrey, EATES Publicity Officer"

The Saffron Walden Museum Society is very grateful for this donation and thanks the East Anglian Traction Engine Society.

Membership

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
- Annual General Meeting – Attend and vote; have your say in how the Museum Society is run.

Reports on Talks

9 February 2026

The Essex Pauper Lunatic Asylum (Warley Hospital)

Speaker; Rachel Bailey-Gibson BA (Hons) MA

The talk is based upon research that Rachel Bailey-Gibson carried out for her Doctorate at the University of Leicester. It looks at the history of this asylum between 1853 and 1921. Before this period, what we now recognise as a mental illness was poorly understood, and likely to be attributed to possession by spirits. People who suffered were cared for by family or by religious institutions or by private carers who were motivated by doing it for profit. The costs were borne by the person's County of birth, and the standard of provision varied wildly. The madness suffered by King George III changed opinions, because someone who was royal should obviously not be punished but rather pitied. An act of Parliament of 1808 enabled a County Council to provide asylums, but did not require it, so few were provided. In 1845 another Act made it compulsory to provide them.

In Essex a Committee was formed to search for a site, and after some deliberation and opposition to some potential sites, the location at Warley was chosen, It was near the new railway, making access easy for the members of the committee. From the accounts of the time they were obviously proud of their new beautiful new building in Tudor style, designed by Henry Kendall, for a cost of £ 45,000. It provided a community atmosphere,

with separate male and female wings arranged around corridors and courtyards, and included a chapel, brewhouse, laundry and theatre, like a self-contained village. It had hot and cold water with a 10,000 gallon water tower, gas lighting and heating. Almost luxurious conditions compared with the workhouses of the time, or even with private residential homes. The builder George Myers had links with Augustus Pugin, so was well connected. An unusual incident was that the plans were stolen and a ransom demanded in 1850, which was paid as there were only one set of drawings. Work started in July 1851, but in September they struck quicksand causing problems. There was a worker's strike later in that year due to losing their 'short' day of work on Saturday, (finishing at 4pm instead of 5pm), if a worker had been away sick for more than 2 weeks, and this lasted for 5 weeks until the management gave way.

Doctor Campbell was the appointed first Medical Superintendent in 1853, and he lived on the site with his family. The first patients arrived in September 1853, and the local press were invited to visit that October, being favourably impressed with the building and the way it was run, changing their previous opinions. One of the features was reaching out to the community by putting on theatrical shows in the asylum theatre, with the main roles played by members of the staff. Dr Campbell was later followed in 1904 by Dr George Amden until 1911 when Dr John Turner took over.

Were the residents in for life? Not necessarily. Justices of the Peace and the Poor law officials decided if people in need should go to a workhouse or asylum, and it needed the opinions of 2 GPs to enter an asylum. Training was given there, and many day-to-day tasks of running the asylum were carried out by the residents. Records showed that one lady learned how to be a seamstress there, and was given £5 by Dr Campbell when she left to found her own business. She eventually repaid the money to the asylum. The asylums wanted their patients to recover, and they had to published their cure rates. This also helped with fund raising. And one achievement was the appointment of a Doctor de Steiger here, the first female doctor so appointed anywhere in the country. A very progressive institution.

An official history of Warley Hospital is available on line at <https://www.warleyhospital.co.uk/official-history> written by Sir Geoffrey Nightingale: 'Warley Hospital: The First Hundred Years'

Tony Morton

9 March 2026
Two Paths, One War
Speaker; George Dziedzic

Two Paths, One War is a tribute to the Author's Polish parents, Jan and Helena, two remarkable individuals whose lives were shaped by the trauma and service of World War Two. Though their journeys were vastly different, they each endured immense hardship, contributed to the Allied war effort, and ultimately found one another in postwar England.

Further information can be found on the website of Barnthorn Publishing where the book can be purchased <https://www.barnthornpublishing.co.uk/team/george-dziedzic>

Tony Morton

Who to contact ...

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