
BRECKLAND COUNCIL

At a Meeting of the

BRECKLAND AREA MUSEUMS COMMITTEE

Held on Monday, 12 October 2020 at 10.00 am pursuant to the Local Authorities and Police & Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020

PRESENT

Mr R.G. Kybird (Chairman)
Mr H. E. J. Clarke
Mr C. Harvey

Mr P.J. Duigan (Vice-Chairman)
Mr T. J. Jermy
Mr M. Kiddle-Morris

Also Present

Mr S. H. Chapman-Allen
Mr K. Robinson

In Attendance

Mr Oliver Bone
Dr Robin Hanley
Mr Andrew Smith

Curator of Kings Lynn and Thetford Museums
Assistant Head of Museums
Operations Manager – West (&East), Norfolk
Museums Service
Democratic Services Officer

Ruth Tudge

Action By

11/20CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Councillor Kybird be appointed as Chairman for the ensuing year.

12/20VICE-CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Councillor Duigan be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the ensuing year.

13/20MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record subject to an amendment to confirm that Councillor Chris Harvey did attend the meeting but was not shown in the attendance.

14/20APOLOGIES

Apologies had been received from Councillors Bowes, Brame, Richmond, and Mr Ward and David Blackburn.

Action By

15/20 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

None.

16/20 URGENT BUSINESS

None.

17/20 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

18/20 ANCIENT HOUSE MUSEUM REPORT

Dr Robin Hanley, Assistant Head of Museums for Norfolk Museums Service (NMS), explained that all NMS museums closed to visitors on 19 March 2020 as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic with the majority of staff working remotely since this time. Most normal activities and services, including general visits and school visits, had been severely impacted. Many NMS staff had been involved in key duties relating to the Norfolk County Council's COVID-19 emergency work including helping to coordinate volunteer activities and managing the distribution of food and medicine to residents who needed support.

During the lockdown period NMS staff had developed a broad range of digital resources to support audiences remotely which had included a significant expansion of social media activity. Resources had also been developed for those in digital poverty or without ready access to digital content.

From the 4 July Government announced that museums could legally reopen with suitable COVID-19 security measures in place and three NMS sites, which included Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse, reopened to the general public on 3 August. All visits had to be pre-booked using timed tickets available from the Art Tickets website and to accommodate social distancing, site visitor capacity had been reduced to approximately 30%.

The layout of Ancient House, with a succession of smaller rooms over two floors, made the re-opening of this site to the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic more difficult, due to the requirements for social distancing. Planning was currently taking place for the limited resumption of carefully controlled on-site activities for schools and young people when it was safe to do so. The NMS had remained ever vigilant in terms of the changing guidance and had continued to be flexible in terms of responding to any new government requirements introduced over time, such as the wearing of face coverings.

Councillor Clarke thanked Dr Hanley, and the NMS staff for all of the hard work that had gone on behind the scenes to make it possible to re-open museums in line with current Government guidelines and in doing so had reassured the public and visitors that Norfolk Museums

Action By

would be a safe and secure environment in which to visit.

The Curator of Kings Lynn and Thetford Museums, Oliver Bone, presented the Ancient House Museum report to Members that covered the period from December 2019 to August 2020.

Ancient House remained closed and they were looking at how it can be opened safely for school groups and young people's groups with still some work to be done and hope that over the winter period would have some resumption to work towards reopening safely in line with Government guidelines.

It was hoped that the Studio Ceramics exhibition, (the last exhibition at the museum prior to lockdown) would be replaced with the Thetford Treasure exhibition which would be a loan from the British Museum of a selection from the late Roman hoard of inscribed and decorated silver spoons and gold jewellery items. A request had been put into the British Museum and a response awaited. Ancient House benefited from high security display cases in the changing exhibition room which facilitated these types of significant loans from national collections.

Two exhibition projects commissioned through the Brecks River and Fen Edge landscape project had been planned for the future. This was a National Lottery funded 5 years scheme and Ancient House were creating exhibitions around Vikings and riverside heritage, two separate strands with associated activities.

Ancient House would like to host permanent displays on the Duleep Singh story. There was a unique aspect of the museum foundation that connected with the Royal family of the Punjab with Prince Frederick Duleep Singh the son of the Maharajah. This would compliment the proposed new display at Thetford Guildhall where there were plans for a Duleep Singh room with a display of paintings. The Museums Service were looking forward to working with Thetford Town Council on this project.

Focus for all staff had been on increasing the digital presence of the museum and it had been used to provide visuals and stories and a mechanism to share information. Staff had developed the Ancient House You Tube channel which had included 59 short films. Other activities included watch along events and online talks that had reached an international audience. They had worked with Dr David Waterhouse on the How to Dig up a Tyrannosaurus which was a popular family activity. Information on the increase in numbers on Twitter and Facebook would be circulated to members after the meeting.

Although the Museum's textile groups had to be put on hold the Museum staff had been making fortnightly phone calls to members to stay connected. The Friends of the Museum continued to support wherever possible and the Friends committee had agreed to extend membership into 2021.

Action By

The Museum had an excellent new trainee in Sami Yussuf who had been contributing to the increase museum's digital information with creating short films and providing much needed technical support.

Oliver thanked the Woodmansterne Art Conservation Awards scheme which had funded the conservation of the Cornell Fison civic portrait. This had been conserved and connected to the water fountain in the marketplace which was a donation from the Fison family.

Ancient House had succeeded in raising funds for the purchase of the David Osborne postcard collection of over 1000 postcards showing Thetford views from the 1870s to the present day. Oliver presented a small selection of some of the postcards and wanted to thank the Arts Council England/V and A purchase grant funds, and Breckland Council through the match funding programme, The Friends of Thetford Museum, the Lady Hind Trust and Thetford Town Council for their support on this project.

The Chair asked Oliver to provide contact details of all of the sponsors in order that a letter of thanks could be sent on behalf of the committee to thank them for their contributions to acquire this important collection.

19/20 GRESSENHALL FARM & WORKHOUSE REPORT

The Operations Manager for East and West, Andrew Smith presented the report to Members that covered the period from December 2019 to September 2020.

Andrew confirmed that Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse closed on 19 March but was very pleased to be able to put the work in place and all the required measurements to reopen on 20 July for a couple of weeks to museum pass holders and friends before reopening to the public on 3 August 20. To accommodate visitors in a safe and Covid secure way numbers were limited to a maximum capacity of 285 people per day with 135 visitors at any one time. During the school holidays approximately 120 visited per day but since the school autumn term started in September the number averaged at 40 to 50 per day with more at weekends.

A themed event during the February half term, The Hunt for Old Tom's Treasure ran from Monday 17 to Friday 19 February, with an average of 216 people per day. Andrew said it had been very sad to cancel the events programme which included many special event days such as A Vintage Affair, Forties Village at War and Apple Day and the very popular Horse Power day due to the ongoing pandemic.

Since the reopening of the Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse on Monday 20 July a reintroduction of small-scale event activities has been instigated. There had been a pencil free children's activity sheet available to all visitors daily and plans were underway for October to include updated activity packs for children and a hands-free obstacle course, and a virtual Christmas event at the workhouse in December.

Action By

The costs of delivery and marketing the Gressenhall event programme continued to be subsidised with funding from Arts Council England (ACE) as part of the 2018-22 Norfolk Museums Service ACE business plan as a National Portfolio Organisation.

Andrew was pleased to confirm that the temporary exhibition Full Steam Ahead did open in February half term which, in the future, would include the Farmers Foundry Company engine which was currently undergoing restoration and hoped to be return in Spring 2021.

Planning had started for a 2021 temporary exhibition entitled More in Commons and NMS would be working in partnership with Norfolk Wildlife Trust, who were celebrating their 95th birthday. The exhibition would be a celebration of the wildlife, history and community of Norfolk's common land.

Staff had also created several online versions of previous temporary exhibitions during the lockdown period which allowed online visitors to explore objects and images at their own pace.

Gressenhall continued to lead on the More Than Oliver Twist project which had been granted a 4-month extension and had been made into a completely digital exhibition which would be ready to publish in mid-October and hosted on the Google Arts and Culture platform.

Lockdown had given the opportunity to recruit further family history research volunteers and research had been completed on all the inmates recorded in the 1881 census. Volunteers had now started researching those in the 1871 census.

A Collecting COVID-19 project was started in response to the national lockdown using a phased approach. The initial phase of collating information was during lockdown and would be followed up in Autumn by a new Living with the Pandemic phase.

Andrew gave a short presentation with photographs of the new Adventure playground at Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse, which, funded through the Norfolk County Council capital programme, was almost ready to open to visitors. The new play equipment had been fully installed, and final elements of landscaping were being completed by the Gressenhall team. A detailed COVID-19 risk assessment and related safe system of work had been written for the playground area and it was hoped to finally open the play area and new equipment in time for October half term. The new look adventure playground would play a key role in attracting families, repeat visitors and NMS Museums Pass holders to the site. The new adventure playground complimented the wider site's existing interpretation including such elements as the wildlife, woodland, heavy horses and farm animals and blended into the surrounding landscape very well whilst providing a key offer for the family audience.

Andrew explained it had been a challenging time for the team across the whole site but particularly the farm as key priorities had to be

Action By

covered particularly the care and feeding of the livestock. There had been weekly farm diaries from March to September which were published in the local press and online. The Chairman suggested webcams might be a good way to watch the animals over the winter period.

Digital work had become more important during the last few months and Gressenhall had worked hard to publish content on Facebook and Twitter. This included a number of projects with video content including a popular Workhouse Murder Mystery and a series of craft activities which were inspired by the popular Art attack activities usually provided on site. Moaning Martha, a fictional inmate character had also been very popular.

The site closure period also saw the development of a new private Facebook group for Gressenhall staff and volunteers. It provided a link to the museum for staff and volunteers who were not able to attend or work on site. Regular updates were provided by staff completing security checks and other essential work on site during lockdown. This included photographs of the farm animals being fed and the buildings, gardens and wildlife. The Chairman asked if Committee Members would be able to join as it would be useful to have the background of what was happening at Gressenhall on a daily or weekly basis. Andrew would look into this for Members.

The Friends of Gressenhall remain supportive but it had not been possible to hold the bi-monthly Committee Meetings at the museum and the second-hand bookshop remained closed so the Friends had been unable to generate any new income from the bookshop in the current financial year but it was hoped to be up and running again as soon as possible.

The Gressenhall Curator, Dr Megan Dennis, continued to co-ordinate, manage and develop the volunteer teams at Gressenhall. A significant amount of time and energy had been spent staying in touch with the group since the national lockdown began in March. Daily emails were sent to the volunteer group and were still generated on weekdays. It provided a regular link to Gressenhall and was appreciated by many of the volunteers, particularly those living alone, or who were shielding. A range of remote volunteering opportunities had seen the volunteer team increase from 120 to over 150 volunteers, including recruiting people from across the UK for the first time which had increased diversity of the volunteer group. These volunteers had worked on family history research, cataloguing workhouse archives and improving collection records. The new project had remote volunteers working together to create a 3D sculpture for the 2021 temporary exhibition More in Commons. Following a detailed review with senior managers and volunteers, approval had been given for the resumption of limited outdoor gardening on the top site at Gressenhall. A small number of gardening volunteers were now able to attend the site in a COVID-19 secure and safe way to carry out essential outdoor works to maintain the garden areas.

Action By

Dr Robin Hanley updated members on the Kick the Dust Project which had been ongoing with since 2018. It was a project funded primarily through the National Lottery Heritage Fund for young people aged 11 to 25 with activity around supporting vulnerable young people who did not normally access the Heritage. The budget was just under £1 million which included an original grant from the Heritage Fund and an additional grant administered by the Heritage Fund known as the Youth Accelerator Fund. The project was required to align to a more digital way of working during lockdown and had involved around 400 young people taking part from March to August.

The Kick the Dust team established a working group with partners to work on a project that was designed to reflect the fact that not all young people had ready access to on line and digital resources with a number of young people in digital poverty. It was identified as a priority to provide a non-digital way for young people to engage with the project during lockdown. An 'Art Parcel' initiative was designed to work with stakeholders to identify vulnerable young people and arrange the distribution of 1,000 packs of arts resources that enabled those young people to engage with the project without being reliant on digital connectivity.

20/20 NEXT MEETING

The arrangements for the next meeting to be held on Monday 25 January 2021 at 10.00am were noted.

The meeting closed at 11.40 am

CHAIRMAN