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**BRECKLAND
AREA MUSEUMS COMMITTEE**

12 October 2020

Item No.

ANCIENT HOUSE, MUSEUM OF THETFORD LIFE REPORT

Report by the Curator, Ancient House Museum

This report provides information on activities at Ancient House, Museum of Thetford Life from December 2019 – August 2020

1 Temporary Closure of Ancient House due to the COVID-19 pandemic

- 1.1 All NMS museums closed to visitors on 19 March 2020 as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. The majority of NMS staff have been working remotely from home since this time.
- 1.2 Many normal activities and services, including general visits and school visits, have been severely impacted due to COVID-19. Many NMS staff have been involved in key duties relating to the Norfolk County Council's (NCC) COVID-19 emergency work, including helping to coordinate volunteer activities, managing the distribution of food and medicine to residents who needed this support, and making telephone calls to identified vulnerable residents.
- 1.3 During the lockdown period NMS staff have developed a broad range of digital resources to support audiences, including resources for children and families. Digital engagement activity included a significant expansion of social media activity. Resources were also developed for those in digital poverty or without ready access to digital content.
- 1.4 The enormous range of NMS activity during lockdown is being captured in the weekly Museums Mardle staff e-newsletter. Members of the committee can be added to this distribution list on request.
- 1.5 Following the Government announcement that museums could legally reopen from 4 July with suitable COVID-19 security measures in place, three NMS sites – Norwich Castle, Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse and Time & Tide Museum have now successfully reopened to visitors, with

Lynn Museum scheduled for reopening during October. This followed the implementation of strict COVID-19 safety procedures that were reviewed and signed-off by the NCC Health & Safety and Wellbeing team. Reopening was also in accordance with sector-specific guidance issued by the National Museums Directors Council. Time & Tide and Gressenhall reopened to Museums Pass holders and Friends on 18 and 20 July respectively, prior to opening to the general public on 3 August. All visits have to be pre-booked using timed tickets available from the Art Tickets website. To accommodate social distancing, site visitor capacity has been significantly reduced.

1.6 Staff training has taken place at all sites in advance of reopening. Staff are provided with any identified PPE and protective screens have been installed at key points. Enhanced staffing levels ensure that visitors can be provided with the necessary support and advice.

1.7 The layout of Ancient House, with a succession of smaller rooms over two floors, makes 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 is currently taking place for the limited resumption of carefully controlled on-site activities for schools and young people when it is safe to do so.

2 Exhibitions and associated events

2.1 *Studio Ceramics* - from 21 September 2019

The last exhibition at the museum prior to lockdown featured a selection of studio pottery from the NMS decorative art collections curated by Senior Curator Dr Francesca Vanke. Before Ancient House re-opens to the public, museum staff plan to deinstall, pack up and remove this display and replace with a new exhibition. The *Studio Ceramics* display was enjoyed by visitors during its run from September 2019 to March 2020.

2.2 Thetford Treasure

The Ancient House staff are liaising with colleagues at the British Museum about the loan of a selection of items from the Thetford Treasure. Originally planned for 2020, staff are now hoping to put on the exhibition in 2021 to provide added interest for the reopening of the museum. There will be a selection of items from the late Roman hoard of inscribed and decorated silver spoons and gold jewellery including the well known gold belt buckle decorated by the figure of a dancing satyr, a Roman mythical creature. Staff at Ancient House are liaising with the loans coordinator at the British Museum to confirm exact dates. The Ancient House benefits from high security display cases in the changing exhibition room which facilitates these type of significant loans from national collections.

2.3 Brecks River and Fen Edge landscape project.

The Ancient House is part the Brecks River and Fen Edge landscape project. The Scheme won a £2m National Lottery grant as part of the proposal for a

£3.5m landscape conservation scheme to follow on from the successful 'Breaking New Ground Landscape Partnership Scheme. The project has now started, albeit delayed by COVID-19. The project is engaging local communities, schools and like-minded organisations to understand, reveal, celebrate and protect the lost heritage of the Brecks' Fen Edge & Rivers over the next 5 years. Rated as one of Britain's top three landscapes for freshwater wildlife, the Brecks are home to nature as significant as that in the New Forest and the Broads. Across the scheme area lie biodiverse chalk streams and networks of ancient Pingo ponds. Although the Brecks area is famed for being sandy and dry, it is the watery landscapes that are the driving force behind the area's unique biodiversity, and its history of human settlement. The Ancient House will receive funding as a partner organisation to produce exhibitions and activities in 2022 and 2023 on the themes of Vikings and Riverside Heritage .

2.4 Duleep Singh Gallery Feasibility

Feasibility work continues for creating a new display in one of the upstairs rooms at Ancient House to make more of the unusual connections between the Museum and the Maharajah Duleep Singh and his family, especially his son Prince Frederick Duleep Singh. There is currently a target date of 2024 for this work, which links to the 100th anniversary of the opening of the museum. New displays at Ancient House will complement the plans for interpretation at Thetford Guildhall with Thetford Town Council.

3 Learning with Adults, Children and Young People

Since the start of the national COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, all face:face activities delivered at the Ancient House ceased and focus shifted to digital delivery. In the period December 2019 to March 2020 covered by this report, there was the usual provision of Mini-Museum club for under 5s, the after-school History Club and Teenage History Club, textile groups and adult talks in association with the Friends of the Museum. School visits also stopped in March. Since mid-March, learning staff have focussed on supporting teachers with digital resources.

4 Digital events and activities

4.1 Social media

The museum staff has continued to use the Ancient House social media presence for keeping up communication with audiences during 2020. Twitter and Facebook accounts are both maintained by all members of the small team. The Ancient House Museum accounts continue to grow with the Twitter account having 3,263 followers and Facebook having 1,224 follows. The Ancient House participated in a number of national social media campaigns including #StayAtHomeChallenge, #ClapForKeyWorkers #MuseumMomentsOfZen. #SouthAsianHeritageMonth, Social media is a way to share museum collections and activities and we have used themes such as #MuseumAlphabet for an A-Z of the museum collections and a History of

Thetford in 100 objects in this way. Museum staff have also linked up with other heritage organisations on social media to share content including #MuseumBuddy with RochdalePioneers Museum and #StillSeeingThings on women's history. Content has also been provided to assist children and families with engaging activities during the lockdown period. One of these was to make origami cranes connected with the commemorations for VJ Day.

4.2 Creation of films about local history and museum activity

Staff have developed the Ancient House You Tube channel to include 59 short films, many of which have been created during 2020. These have included instructions for making spoons for inclusion in the forthcoming Thetford Treasure display, Second World War (including VE day and VJ day pieces), Duleep Singh, Queer History, Teenage History Club, and the #MuseumMomentofZen series

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKWo8PNwK0pj-swIlebFBqw/playlists?disable_polymer=1

4.3 Watchalongs and discussion

Two communal watchalong events were staged with a Q and A session afterwards. *The Black Prince* film event took place on 14 June in association with the Sikh Museum Initiative and Essex Cultural Diversity Project. *For Sama* took place in September, in association with City of Sanctuary and Aid Matters. The Ancient House team also participated in the David Copperfield watchalong for #NorfolkDay.in July.

4.4 Online talks

The Museum has provided several well supported live online talks provided using the Zoom webinar function – Dr Priya Atwal spoke on Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire on 16 September and Learning Officer Melissa Hawker gave a family talk on the Duleep Singh family on 11 August and there was also a pre-recorded talk by NMS Natural History Curator Dr David Waterhouse entitled *How to Dig up a Tyrannosaurus - adventures in the mid-west of America*.

4.5 Teenage History Club

Melissa Hawker, Learning Officer has continued to run the Teenage History Club from a distance with weekly Zoom get togethers during 2020. The young people have been

4.6 Live Stream of Computer Game, Assassin's Creed

This event held in August proved to be a new way of sharing the Duleep Singh story with new audiences.

5 Other Museum Developments

5.1 Volunteers

The small team of volunteers continued to meet on a weekly basis in the Museum up until March when the museum closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

5.2 Textile groups

The Museum's textile groups stopped attending the Museum in March. Museum staff have been phoning round the ladies once a fortnight to check all is well and stay connected.

5.3 Friends of the Museum

The Friends of the Museum continue to support the Museum through fundraising and promoting the Museum in the town. Because of the cancellation of the talks programme and temporary closure of the museum, the Friends committee have agreed to extend membership into 2021.

5.4 Teaching Museum Trainee Scheme

The Ancient House has continued to host a paid traineeship, provided through the NMS *Teaching Museum* programme. The 2019-20 Ancient House trainee was Paula Murphy who has contributed to the museum's after-school History Club, work with the Teenage History Club, a volunteer project to make new learning resources and the research and production of the *Studio Ceramics* exhibition. The traineeship is funded through the NMS Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation 2018-2022 Business Plan. Our current trainee is Sami Yussuf, who has been contributing to the museum's digital offer through accessing the museum database, creating short films, writing press releases, providing technical support for webinars and researching and creating content about the museum collections.

5.5 David Osborne's postcard collection fundraising

The Ancient House has succeeded in raising the funds for purchase of the David Osborne postcard collection of over 1000 cards showing Thetford views from the 1870s to the present day.

5.6 Art UK

In December 2019 photographs of the museum's sculpture collection were taken to join the ArtUK national database of artworks. The Ancient House collection can be viewed here:

https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/view_as/list/search/keyword:thetford--work_type:sculpture

5.7 Conservation of portrait of Cornell Fison

NMS succeeded in raising funds to conserve the Thetford civic portrait of Cornell Fison through a grant from the Woodmansterne Art Conservation Awards 2018/ 2019. Cornell Fison (1793 – 1880) served as mayor of Thetford in the 1850s and at one time owned the building that today houses the Ancient House Museum. The painting is by J. Whiting and is dated to 1880, the year of Fison's death.

6 Visitor & digital participation numbers

6.1 Up to date visitor & digital participation figures will be shared at the meeting.

7 Resource implications

(a)	<u>Finance</u>	None
(b)	<u>Property</u>	None
(c)	<u>Staff</u>	None
(d)	<u>Information Technology</u>	None

8 Recommendations:

That the Area Museums Committee notes the report

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