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**BRECKLAND
AREA MUSEUMS COMMITTEE**

14 September 2021

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 January 2021 – August 2021

1. COVID-19 Service update

1.1 Following a long period of closure caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the Ancient House reopened to the public on 22 June 2021. Full safety measures have been put in place including hand sanitising facilities, additional ventilation and clearly signed routes. Staff have been trained in safe systems of working to operate the museum safely, including implementation of additional cleaning measures. Staff are provided with any identified PPE and a protective screen has been installed at the museum reception. Visits can be pre-booked using timed tickets available from the Art Tickets website. To accommodate social distancing, site visitor capacity has been reduced.

1.2 All Norfolk Museums Service (NMS) museums closed to visitors on 19 March 2020 as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic. The majority of NMS non frontline staff have been working remotely from home since this time. Following a phased COVID-secure reopening of four NMS museum sites including Norwich Castle during July and August 2020, all NMS closed again from 5 November 2020 as part of the second national lockdown. Following the announcement that Norfolk would be in Tier 2, three NMS sites reopened to the public on Thursday 3 December 2020. These sites were Norwich Castle, Time & Tide Museum and Lynn Museum, with the seasonal site at Gressenhall remaining closed until the start of the 2021 season. Following the announcement that Norfolk would be in Tier 4 from Boxing Day, all NMS sites closed again with effect from 24 December 2020. Following the government announcement that indoor museums could reopen from 17 May 2021 as part of Roadmap Step 3, seven NMS sites reopened to visitors in the week beginning 17 May. These sites were

Norwich Castle, the Museum of Norwich, Lynn Museum, Time & Tide Museum, the Elizabethan House Museum, Cromer Museum and Gressenhall Farm & Workhouse (outdoor areas at Gressenhall had reopened on 12 April under Step 2). Subsequently, museum reopenings have taken place at Ancient House Museum and Strangers' Hall. All legal restrictions specific to museums were removed by the Government with effect from 19 July 2021 (Step 4).

1.3 Despite the ending of legal restrictions on 19 July, many of the existing COVID-secure systems and procedures remain in place, with a focus on keeping staff and visitors safe through minimising the risk of transmission. Visitors are being requested (rather than legally required) to follow these procedures. The key changes to NMS procedures include:

- The wearing of face coverings by visitors and staff is now “expected and recommended” rather than required by law
- 2m social distancing is no longer a requirement. Visitors are instead being requested to abide by “respectful distancing” from other visitors and staff
- Test & Trace venue check-in is now advisory rather than a legal requirement
- The pre-booking of tickets is no longer a requirement, but is now recommended. Walk-in visits are permitted where there is sufficient site capacity
- Site capacity limits have been increased (previously averaging 30% of normal capacity) and pre-booked ticket slots adjusted to accommodate an overall increase in visitor numbers.
- Priority on-site activities have resumed including delivery to schools and young people. Some on-site public events have also resumed. All such activities are still the subject of strict COVID-19 procedures, with Safe Systems of Work being created to protect staff and visitors.

1.4 In terms of the COVID-19 procedures and systems that remain in place across NMS sites, the priorities remain:

- Ventilation – maintaining existing ventilation arrangements to maximise fresh air flow including supplementary air purifiers at relevant sites
- Cleaning regimes – maintaining enhanced cleaning arrangements including toilets and regular touch points
- Hand sanitisation – maintaining existing sanitiser stations and encourage regular hand sanitisation/hand washing. Additional hand sanitiser stations are being introduced where required (e.g. near reactivated interactives)

1.5 Many museum activities and services, including general visits and school visits, have been severely impacted due to COVID-19. NMS staff have been involved in supporting key work relating to the Norfolk County Council's (NCC) COVID-19 response, 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. NMS staff have also been helping with

other COVID response work including supporting the work of the NHS and the NCC Trading Standards and Registrars' teams.

- 1.6 Throughout the period of the pandemic, NMS staff have developed a broad range of digital resources to support audiences, including resources for children and families. Digital engagement included a significant expansion of social media activity. Resources continue to be made available for those in digital poverty or without ready access to digital content.
- 1.7 The enormous range of NMS activity during the period of COVID-19 disruption continues to be captured in the weekly *Museums Mardle* staff e-newsletter. A reminder that members of the committee can be added to this distribution list on request.
- 1.8 The reopening of museum sites during 2020 and 2021 followed the implementation of strict COVID-19 safety procedures that were reviewed and signed-off by the NCC Health & Safety and Wellbeing team. Reopening also took place in accordance with sector-specific guidance issued by the National Museums Directors Council and in liaison with the English Civic Museums Network.
- 1.9 Staff training has taken place at all NMS sites in advance of reopening. Staff are provided with any identified PPE and protective screens remain in place at key points. Enhanced staffing levels ensure that visitors can be provided with the necessary level of support and advice. Refresher training for staff took place in advance of the reopening of museum sites.
- 1.10 During periods of site closure, all NMS sites were the subject of regular premises, security and collections condition checks. Statutory maintenance continued, as did essential construction and maintenance works, with strict COVID-19 management procedures in place.
- 1.11 The Ancient House had a short temporary closure period between 6-14 August caused by a number of staff having to self-isolate following a close contact with a positive COVID-19 case. All those affected undertook the required period of isolation to reduce the risk of further spread of the virus and the museum reopened on 17 August. All those who had booked to visit during this period were contacted and given refunds.

2 Building Works at former King's Head pub, next door to the Ancient House

Building works at the former King's Head pub, a listed building next door to the Ancient House, caused disruption to the museum last winter. The King's Head remains covered in scaffolding following the involvement of Breckland District Council and the Health and Safety Executive.

As a result of the neighbouring works, the museum had to alter plans for the safe return of school groups and the Teenage History Club in December 2020. The museum team also had to carry out additional conservation cleaning prior to reopening.

For the information of the Committee, Prince Frederick Duleep Singh gave the Ancient House to the Borough of Thetford on 3 September 1921 as a charity ('Public Museum'). The trustee of the charity is Breckland Council. The museum is maintained and operated as part of the Norfolk Museums Service through the Norfolk Joint Museums Agreement. Maintenance of the museum is undertaken by Norse through the Total Facilities Management (TFM) agreement. The TFM manager liaises with the Breckland Council's Historic Buildings officer on the care of this grade one listed building.

3 Exhibitions and associated events

3.1 *Studio Ceramics*, until 10 July 2021

The first weeks of reopening of the Ancient House gave visitors a last chance to see the *Studio Ceramics* exhibition. This featured a selection of studio pottery from the NMS decorative art collections curated by Senior Curator Dr Francesca Vanke. Museum staff carefully packed the pots for transport. Some of the ceramics have gone on to *Stories of Lynn* at King's Lynn Town Hall for exhibition there.

3.2 *Thetford Treasure* (22 July 2021 – 29 January 2022)

The current exhibition at Ancient House is *The Thetford Treasure*. The display features 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. The objects were installed by staff from the British Museum alongside members of the NMS team. The Ancient House benefits from high security display cases in the changing displays room which enables loans from national collections. Norfolk Museums Service is grateful to the Trustees of the British Museum for the loan of the Thetford Treasure.



Roman gold belt buckle from the Thetford Treasure

In addition to the Thetford hoard of gold and silver, the exhibition also features a rare hoard of Roman glass and pewter objects from Hockwold, carefully conserved by NMS conservators.



Roman glass from Hockwold on display at Ancient House

The BBC have covered the Thetford Treasure display on the BBC website, Radio Norfolk and Look East TV news. The exhibition has also been covered in local newspapers. This publicity has helped boost visitor numbers.

3.3 Brecks River and Fen Edge landscape project.

The Ancient House is part of the Lottery-funded Brecks River and Fen Edge (BFER) landscape project. The Scheme won a £2m National Lottery Heritage Fund grant as part of the proposal for a £3.5m landscape conservation scheme. 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. The Ancient House Museum will receive funding as a partner organisation to produce exhibitions and activities in 2022 and 2023 on the themes of Vikings and Riverside Heritage.

The Vikings exhibition will be part of the 'River Raiders' strand. Museum staff are working with the team at BFER and Dr Richard Hoggett to curate the exhibition. The project is involving members of the Teenage History Group in choosing artefacts and themes for display as 'community curators'. The Ancient House is requesting loans of material from other museum collections for the exhibition, guided by input from the young people.

3.4 Duleep Singh Gallery Feasibility

Feasibility work continues for creating new displays 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.

4 Learning with Adults, Children and Young People

The national COVID-19 lockdowns caused all face-to-face activities delivered at the Ancient House to cease with the focus shifting to digital delivery. This included a series of 'Quiz a Character' sessions with the delivery of a workshop to a school via Zoom. Children have for example been invited to meet Mary Jane, the lady's maid to Maharani Bamba at Elveden Hall and also Maggie the Munitionette.

Following careful risk assessment and with reduced group sizes to allow for social distancing, school workshops for pre-booked groups started up again from 17 May 2021. The Museum hosted an on-line meeting of the Brecks Heritage Schools Network on 23 June 2021.

5 Digital events and activities

5.1 Social media

Museum staff have continued to use the Ancient House social media presence for keeping up communication with audiences during 2021. Twitter and Facebook accounts are both maintained by members of the small team. The Museum's social media feeds use a variety of ways to share content about the museum's collections, activities and local stories. Particular themes over the recent period have included: *#MyLocalMuseum*, *#MuseumofDan* (one of the museum volunteers), *#HeritageTreasures* (with the National Lottery Heritage Fund); *#PrideMonth2021*, *#CitizenScience* *#VolunteerWeek* *#FlintFriday*, *#WatercolourWednesday*.

The Ancient House Museum accounts continue to grow with the Twitter account having 3,461 followers with Facebook having 1,489 follows.

The Museum's Twitter page may be seen here:

<https://twitter.com/AncientHouseMus>

The Museum's Facebook page may be seen here

<https://www.facebook.com/AncientHouseMuseum/>

5.2 Creation of films about local history and museum activity

Staff have developed the Ancient House YouTube channel to include 77 short films, many of which have been created during the pandemic period. The link lists the Museum's films on YouTube:

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

5.3 Watchalongs

Museum staff developed several 'watchalong' events for people to join in from their own homes. These were done in partnership with other museums. The Paddington 2 watchalong took place on 17 January 2021 and an episode of Dad's Army was watched on 13 February 2021. These events provided

opportunities to share local history and museum collections content through Twitter in a light-hearted way.

5.4 Online talks and events

The Museum has provided a programme live online talks provided using the Zoom webinar function

In association with the Museum Friends, Dan Morgan spoke on *Victorian Toy Theatres* on 13 April, Mike Wabe spoke about *Town Criers* on 11 May and Annette Morgan spoke about *A Landscape Speaks*, her textile work inspired by Sutton Hoo on 7 June.

In addition, Prof Lucy Bland spoke on *Britain's Brown Babies*, stories of babies born out of wedlock to black GIs and white British Women on 24 February. Gurinder Singh Mann spoke about *The British and the Sikhs* on 22 June. Dr Sumita Mukherjee gave a talk on *Indian suffragettes* on 8 August and Dr Priya Atwal spoke on Maharajah Duleep Singh's early life in *Royals and Rebels* on 22 July as part of South Asian Heritage Month, in association with the Essex Cultural Diversity Project.



Tweet promoting the talk by Dr Sumita Mukherjee

In conjunction with Lynn Museum, a family presentation of *A Sherlock Holmes Investigates* was given by Jonathan Goodwin from Cellar Theatre on Saturday 22 May.

5.5 Teenage History Club

NMS Learning Officer Melissa Hawker has continued to run the Teenage History Club from a distance with weekly Zoom get togethers during 2020. The young people were able to return to the museum as part of the easing of restrictions in the early summer.

6 Other Museum Developments

6.1 Volunteers

Volunteering at the museum is currently suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions. It is anticipated that indoor volunteering will begin to recommence across NMS sites during the autumn.

6.2 Textile groups

Members of the Museum's 'Knit and Knatter' groups are currently making knitted Roman mythical creatures for use in the Thetford Treasure exhibition.

6.3 Friends of the Museum

The Friends of the Museum continue to support the Museum through fundraising and promoting the Museum in the town. The talks programme has gone on-line. The summer social was held in person as a garden party, which was much appreciated by members.

6.4 Teaching Museum Trainee Scheme

The Ancient House has continued to host a paid traineeship, provided through the NMS *Teaching Museum* programme. The traineeship is funded through the NMS Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation 2018-2022 Business Plan. Current trainee Sami Yusuf has had a different experience for his traineeship with much support of digital delivery work over the past 18 months. He has also been able to contribute to the reopening of the museum, assisted with fundraising, documentation improvement, work on the postcard collection acquisition and exhibition changes. Sami has recently succeeded in securing a position in Norfolk Museums Service in the development office and staff wish him every success in his museum career.

6.5 David Osborne's postcard collection acquisition

The Ancient House has purchased the David Osborne postcard collection of 1,155 cards of Thetford views from the 1870s to the present day following successful fundraising. A new display has been made in the museum with a screen to show a selection of images.



The late David Osborne, photographed in 2007 with one of the postcard albums acquired by the Ancient House

7 Visitor Numbers

7.1 Up to date visitor figures will be circulated at the meeting.

8 Resource implications

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

9 Recommendations:

That the Area Museums Committee notes the report

Originator of report:

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