

The Almanack

June 2019

The Newsletter of the Huntingdonshire Local History Society www.huntslhs.org.uk

Introduction

When you were young, or your children and grand-children were, did you take carrier bags with you when you went for walks in the countryside or to the seaside, for all those ‘treasures’ found along the way? My sister and I did, and so did our off-spring. When we returned home they would be displayed on window sills or bookcases or trays similar to these.



Brought up in North Devon during the war years we were able to make regular visits to beaches and the country-side; most of our holidays were spent on farms in the Exe Valley. We were frequent visitors to The North Devon Athenaeum where the elderly ‘keeper of the keys’ (to the cabinets) befriended us. The contents of each bag would be laid out on a table then he would tell us about our ‘finds’, opening exhibition showcases and drawers so that we could compare our ‘treasures’ with their specimens and then we’d copy out the names and anything else he said was important. I always looked forward to these visits; the ‘old man’s enthusiasm has remained with me ever since.

This issue will focus on museums (no longer athenaeums) in Huntingdonshire, and I hope you will be encouraged to visit, and support them in whatever way you can.

All our museums provide insights into community life over the centuries. Many have objects from the Neolithic period to the 20th century. Wherever you find them they are likely to have much in common with each other even if their displays differ. All have their origins in people who were avid collectors. All are independent bodies, with Boards of Trustees. Each one will have to fund their activities, like administration and running costs and, perhaps most importantly find people to care for the collections and keep them open and available for us to visit. None specialize in one subject or period in time.

Whether you are researching your family tree, the place where you now live, or the history of individuals or businesses an ideal place to start is a visit to a museum. Historical information may be found other places but to see actual items excites me. Seventy-five years ago I might have been

allowed to handle specimens which today are behind glass, labelled in such small writing I can no longer read but if there's a knowledgeable 'volunteer' guide around visitors will learn more.

There seem to be two types of museum; those accredited and those that are not. Accreditation means that they strictly comply with a set of rules and regulations, keep accurate records of artefacts and that besides conserving them they make them available for public viewing. This enables them to apply for grants from grant making bodies like HLF. Those with a # against their name are in the former category. Smaller museums rely on goodwill, voluntary effort and local fund-raising; they may specialize in local interests – water pumping or specific trades and pursuits some of which may attract funding from other sources.

Our smallest is THE PORCH MUSEUM in Godmanchester. It's name is derived from its location, in the porch of the former Queen Elizabeth School. It opens approximately once a month throughout the summer when visitors are more likely. There are plans for it to relocate to St Mary's parish church; will it then change its name?

Perhaps our largest is RAMSEY RURAL MUSEUM. # It's exhibits are not restricted to farming or rural life. Although an Accredited Museum it is run entirely by volunteers. For this reason the museum is only open on Thursdays and at weekends. The focus is on the Ramsey area. Over 60,000 items have been donated, loaned or purchased. Every-thing is either stored in barns, sheds, a cottage or in the open. Maintenance of everything is carried out throughout the year. Raising the cash to run the museum is a major but essential activity diverting volunteers' time from conserving their stock. Hopeful all our readers will have visited and not begrudged paying an entrance fee and will have bought refreshments and gifts – every penny counts. Many tasks remain needing attention to maintain registration status from the digitization of records to weeding the site or repainting outdoor exhibits. Could you join the team?

There are two more rather unusual 'museums' in Ramsey – The Mortuary Chapel and The Walled Garden, both restored and cared for by volunteers. Each deserves a visit but seem to open irregularly.

THE NORRIS MUSEUM #, in St Ives covers the whole of Huntingdonshire in its remit. Its origins lie in a diverse collection of books, documents and objects relating to the county's history lovingly acquired over many years by St Ives born HERBERT ELLIS NORRIS (1859-1931), an amateur historian, when he was living in The Cotswolds. Whilst living there he researched, wrote about and published articles and books on the history of St Ives. Although his parents were boot and shoemakers Herbert didn't seem to have followed in their trade instead he traded as a jeweler and silversmith. It is assumed that on his death, at his home in Cirencester, his collection was brought back to St Ives.

The museum and library were opened in 1933 to showcase his many treasures. The objective was to continue adding material relating to former Huntingdonshire county and to conserve them for future generations. The museum now holds over 33,000 items. Its buildings, set in an attractive riverside garden, are a major asset to the town and local area. With the aid of a Heritage Lottery grant extensive refurbishments and extensions were completed in 2017. There are extensive opportunities for community involvement. The museum's staff, supported by an enthusiastic team of volunteers, have a lively outreach programme.

The ST NEOTS Museum # began life in the 1960s when two school teachers set up a Trust to run a museum in two empty classrooms. They put together a collection of items to help children understand how their ancestors had lived and worked and about the history of their local area. When

they retired, and the classrooms were required for teaching purposes; the museum needed a new home. The forward-looking town council provided alternative accommodation conditional on a group being formed to run it and look after the artefacts. The teachers' endeavours were rewarded and today we can enjoy a diverse assembly of material with lots of explanatory notices. A variety of activities are run for all ages, talks given by staff and volunteers and a range of literature produced.

CROMWELL MUSEUM # holds the best collection of Cromwelliana on public display in the world. The collection comprises nearly 700 items, including portraits, clothing, miniatures, arms and armour, historical documents written by or about Cromwell, and one of his death masks. Having secured the necessary funding the building and its displays are being substantial upgraded. Exciting times.

MARCH has its own museum, located in the High Street. It is in the building that was originally the South District Girls School, constructed in the 1850s; the building passed from school to school, until 1976 when the building was purchased by the Town Council. The Museum was opened in 1977. It is open every Saturday and Wednesday from 10:30 am to 3.30 pm and contains a vast amount of local memorabilia, both from the town and the surrounding villages. Its curator is supported by a band of enthusiastic volunteers.

CHATTERIS MUSEUM, open Tues and Thursdays between 2.00pm – 4.30pm and on Saturdays between 10.00am – 1.00p, under the guiding hand of a curator, is run by some many similar ones. It can be found at 14 Church Lane. They have recently completed a cabinet containing fossils from the Chatteris area, showing the origins of their landscape in the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods. Work is currently carried out to create a run of cabinets holding a display of local items from their collection showing the development of the town from 250,000 bc to 1901AD.

Because we now live in a digital age doesn't mean museums are redundant. They remain important sources of information about one's neighbourhood so we should still visit. The digitization of stored artefacts should make more information available. Labelling an exhibit cannot contain everything there is to know about it. Viewing the actual object tells us more. For future generations museums will be a valuable resource but don't miss opportunities to visit today. Please examine yourselves to see if there anything more you could do to encourage and support the teams; perhaps become a volunteer yourself.

Society News

After serving as our President for fifteen years Dr Simon Thurley indicated that he would like to stand down from this position after he had given his 2019 lecture. Many will have enjoyed these popular lectures; at a mutually agreed date we will show our appreciation for all the time he has devoted to our Society. His final lecture, an all ticket occasion, will take place in the Town Hall on Wednesday, 17th July at 7.30pm.

After diligent enquiries an invitation was made to Dr David Starkey, eminent historian and TV personality, to be our new president. We are delighted to announce that he has accepted our invitation. A small sub-committee has been formed to welcome him and firm up how he will work with us.

Committee Activities

Three items formed the main business of the two meetings we have had since the last newsletter was published. Those were 1) finding a new president; we're delighted that Dr Starkey has accepted our invitation; 2) confirming the recommendations of the Goodliff Awards Panel - the winners will be announced at the AGM with Awards being presented by the President when he gives his final lecture; and 3) our participation in the Huntingdonshire History Festival. We are pleased that this year events will take place more widely in what was once Huntingdonshire. We hope you will show your appreciation by join in some, if not all, of the planned programme of events.

Thank you for the encouraging words after publication of the first 'newsletter style' Almanack. The quiz seems to have aroused interest and prompted one member to contribute to this edition's puzzle section. Did you identify all three puzzle pictures? For those you that didn't here are the answers :-

A can be found in the Ramsey Abbey Gatehouse and is a ceiling boss from the abbey
B is one of the Stations of the Cross in the garden of Little Gidding church.
C on the roadside at Green End, Great Stukeley.

Here are three more pictured for you to puzzle over

Who might use these ? What for?



D



E



F (Used in pairs)

The answers will be on our website after the History Festival

Copy for January 2020 to Secretary by November 14th please: miked.3539@gmail.com