

Dereham Heritage Trust – Annual Report 2022

Meetings and Newsletters

Covid-19 precautions have again curtailed our activities, and for much of the year we were deciding from month to month whether it was feasible to go back to face-to-face meetings. In the end we held 11 of our monthly meetings on-line, and only at our December meeting did the committee feel it practicable for us all to get together, for an evening with Hexachordia. The on-line talks have either been pre-recorded, followed by live discussion with the speaker, or delivered live over Zoom, with a recording of the session being made available to members for a limited time afterwards. When the number of people watching the recording is added to those present on the evening, the overall “attendance” is well over that for our face-to-face meeting before Covid

We have been very grateful to speakers for their flexibility in adapting to an on-line format. A couple of speakers felt that their talks were unsuitable for this, and we are particularly grateful to others who have stepped in and maintained a full programme.

Our newsletters seem to be getting fatter, with the last four issues totalling almost 100 pages. As well as producing these, Ken Hawkins provides the summary of each talk, adding permanent value.



The prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, who was able to join our September meeting with the help of her friend Georgette Vale.

An additional feature this year has been the excerpts from the forthcoming book “The History of Norfolk in 100 places”, by David Robertson and our members Peter and Susanna Wade-Martins, which should be in print by the time you read this report. However, the rest of the Newsletter is articles by members on their own research and interests, so if you are working on something, do add to the variety of material by letting Ken have a piece.

Membership and assets

As we approach the end of our membership year, we have 67 members, compared with 65 this time last year and 70 five years ago. Almost 90% of our

membership have online access, but our aim must be to maintain service to 100%. We look forward to getting back to regular face-to-face meetings, but the evidence is that being able to put recordings online involves a wider audience, so we plan to maintain that too.

A sad event this year was the death of our president, Jonathan Boston. Jonathan was the son of one of our founders, Canon Noel Boston, so his passing broke a link with the very beginning of the society in 1953. However, Jonathan was far from being just a pioneer’s son, and there are many records and recollections of his ongoing interest and help reaching back to the 1960s. We shall miss him.

Our accounts show that we are in a sound financial position. We have made a small operating surplus this year, notably due to loss of Museum income, offset by not having to pay room charges for our talks. As a result, we have not needed to draw on the Small Business Grant that we received last year. As detailed below, we also had a grant to purchase some display boards, which should be a very useful long term asset, and a TV which we can use for presentations in the Museum and elsewhere. We are also grateful for annual grants from Dereham Town Council., without which we could not operate the Museum and Archive.

Bishop Bonner's Cottage Museum

Building work has continued at the Museum, lasting longer than any of us expected. We were delighted that the Town Council employed pargeting authority Anna Kettle to restore the decorative plasterwork, which now looks very elegant. Research by Sue Walker into the history of the paintwork showed that the pargeting had been uncoloured until about 1905.



The restored pargeting

We joined her in proposing to the Town Council that it should remain the natural colour of the limewash, and the Heritage and Open Spaces Committee agreed with this unanimously. Public response has been mixed, but it will take some time for the new arrangement to be an accepted part of the townscape.

Internally, work has strengthened the old brickwork in one of the fireplaces.

We took the opportunity to get advice on the cottage from Susan and Michael Brown, experts on East-Anglian timber framed buildings. Their illuminating study was reported in the October newsletter. We are now trying to get funding to have dendrochronology applied to key timbers, which we hope will finally establish the dating of the cottages. We hope to combine this with the Browns' work on the structure, and Susan Walker's on the painting, to produce a booklet on the Cottages which will be more complete and authoritative than anything produced before, and will much improve the experience of people visiting the Museum.

The building work and Covid-19 combined to prevent our opening the Museum during 2021, but we are planning to open for the summer of 2022 at the end of April. Last year we reported on preparations for an exhibition on John and Ellenor Fenn and their work and connection with the Paston letters. We are in the process of clearing the downstairs south room for this. Several people worked hard on the research, and Sue Walker designed about 35 display panels which have now been printed. This has been made possible by funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, through the



Part of the window display in Wright's Walk, using our new display boards

Paston Footprints project, and this has also linked our work with displays and events on the Pastons elsewhere in Norfolk. The Fund also paid for a set of large display boards, and a TV which will be used to show animations on the Pastons and John Fenn. We plan later to use the TV to provide some experience of the displays in rooms which cannot be accessed by people of limited mobility.

Although the Museum could not open, Dencora, the developer behind the Wright's Walk area, gave us the opportunity of having a shop window display for two months of material about John and Ellenor Fenn, which connected

well with the opening of the Ellenor Fenn Garden. We also used that space to promote the Museum and seek volunteers, although there was no immediate response - an unmanned display is a much less successful way of doing this compared with one where passers-by can talk to current volunteers. Nevertheless, this sort of display makes the public more aware of DHT and the Museum.

Being an asset to the town

We aim not just to give enjoyment and information to our members, but to make Dereham a better place to live for everyone. The Museum and Archive are one part of this. Also, several of us contributed to the panels which have been put up in various parts of central Dereham describing many aspects of our history, although the one which most affects us, near the Museum, has yet to be erected. Sue Walker led on the panels, and contributed her skill and expertise to the Ellenor Fenn Garden, Dereham's new park. We also put a lot of effort into commenting on drafts of a Town Plan being produced by consultants for Breckland District Council, although the fruit of this has yet to be seen.

The Archive

In addition to the Museum, the Trust has an Archive of material relevant to the history of the Town, consisting of documents and especially artefacts which provide material for exhibitions in the Museum. It is important that the thousands of items are properly kept and recorded, and for the past two years two volunteers who were trained at Gressenhall Museum, Sue Marsh and Heather Ryder, have been working to update this. Most of the material is housed in a room in Dereham Town Council offices in the Assembly Rooms. Members of the public are welcome to apply to consult this material, but of course access has been restricted during the pandemic. We are continually offered new items for consideration, and some of these we report in the Newsletter. After a long search for more space we were extremely pleased to be offered use of a room in Church House, and we are very grateful to St Nicholas' Church for this. Work with the Church in mutual interests dates back many years, and we look forward to future cooperation.

Running the Trust

The activity reported here is the outcome of a lot of effort by committee members and other volunteers. The Committee consists of the Trustees and others, including our Museum Mentor, Megan Dennis, who gives us valuable professional advice, and Phillip Duigan, representing the Town Council. (Trustees are elected by the membership, and the Trustees appoint other committee members.) Illness this year led to some reorganisation, and at the AGM we will ask the membership to confirm two committee members who were co-opted as Trustees, Sue Rockley and Peter Wade-Martins. In addition, two of the Trustees will retire in rotation, Robena Brown and Ken Hawkins, but both are standing for re-election. The Trustees have appointed Hilary Williams as a committee member.



One of the "Wayfinding Panels", with the Ellenor Fenn Garden in the background.

Nevertheless, we badly need more help, and if you might be interested in contributing “to advance the education of the public in the archaeology and history of Dereham” and its environs, in the words of the constitution, please ask for more information. Most members of the committee could not claim to be expert in these fields. We will shortly be making more specific appeals for help.

In addition, but vitally, we need volunteers to take turns to act as stewards in the Museum when we open, from May to September. Many people in Dereham will tell you that the Museum always seems to be shut. We would like to open longer, but at the moment it is not easy to maintain our present limited opening hours.

Trevor Ogden
Chair, for the Trustees.
February 2022