

HERTFORDSHIRE MUSEUMS

Hertfordshire Association of Museums

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24



HERTFORDSHIRE ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

The past year has been one of change for Museums Development in Hertfordshire and nationally. Proposed changes to the Arts Council England's (ACE) Museum Development map signalled the end of SHARE Museums East and preparation for a new restructured programme that would cover the whole of the Southeast region. In Hertfordshire we have worked closely with SHARE for 13 years and are delighted that their work, and our partnership, will continue as part of the Museum Development South East (MDSE) programme.

We encouraged Hertfordshire Museums to feed into the consultation as the new programme was developed. We also took the opportunity to review our county offer, asking museum to feedback on communication, programming and to identify training needs we could support going forward. We had a good response from museum staff and volunteers and are grateful for their positive comments and helpful suggestions.

The most recent data (2022-23) shows a 29 per cent increase in visitors to museums in the East of England compared to the previous year. However, volunteer engagement has not quite kept pace with recovery: volunteer hours are still 8 per cent lower than they were in 2019 and there is a 14 per cent drop in the number of people volunteering in museums. Higher costs have also impacted museums in the region with 60 per cent reporting an increase in expenditure, which has been offset by a small increase in income in just over half of museums. Museums reported higher expenditure on energy bills, materials, and staff, especially for short-term contracts. In Hertfordshire, museum staff and volunteers told us they were concerned that the ongoing cost of living crisis would lead to further rises in costs, coinciding with a fall in income from donations and admission.

The year saw a particular focus on Art in our museums. North Herts Museum's evocative Diana Arbus exhibition, part of the ARTIST ROOMS series in partnership with Tate and National Galleries of Scotland, was popular and highly praised. A collaboration between St Albans Museum, University of Herts Arts and artist Rana Begum, explored colour relationships and visual perceptions of pattern in an exhibition, a series of events and a bespoke installation in the museum assembly rooms. Bushey Museum celebrated 30 years of public opening with an exhibition curated by volunteers and stewards, who were given the opportunity to choose a favourite painting to hang in an exhibition in the Council Chamber.

During 2023 many of our museums have been focusing on strategy and business planning. The museum accreditation scheme, which had been paused for almost four years, finally reopened, and the first tranche of museums were called to resubmit their plans and policies for review by ACE. Such a long delay between return dates meant that for many organisations there was plenty that needed updating or rethinking, and for all but the most longstanding it was the first time current staff and trustees were submitting for their organisation. In other museums, review or restructure was necessary due to staff changes or funding challenges. Whatever the reasons for reform, we have provided individual support for trustees or directors as well as signposting further support and training where needed.

ADDRESS TO MUSUEMS

Caroline Clapper, Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

September 2024

The Hertfordshire Association of Museums has been active for 12 years and I am incredibly pleased that Hertfordshire County Council has supported it for so long, and recognised the huge value of having a consistent county level museums development programme. I am also grateful to the Arts Council for supporting the Hertfordshire Museums Development programme in the past and going forward.

Museums play an important role in encouraging public participation. They are places of debate and exchange, and can be an important safe space for us to negotiate complex ideas and reflect on systematic challenges. Museums and communities working together create a sense of belonging and ownership and help residents understand more about their locality. Understanding where we are, and where we have come from, are key to deciding where we want to be, and how we want to get there.

You are constantly finding new ways to make your museums more accessible. Each new interpretation of our heritage creates a new narrative, and a new understanding of our shared past. Partnerships, learning, new ways of explaining and presenting your collections, all create new paths for people to interact with your organisation and, perhaps most importantly, with each other.

None of this would be possible without your passion hard work and commitment. I know the day-to-day reality of maintaining your visitor offer can be a long list of impossible tasks. Funding, footfall, maintenance are all daily challenges to be overcome and the resources available to you are scarce and insecure.

The list of what museums can and should do seems to grow ever longer. Affordable, popular, socially cohesive spaces for creativity and learning is just the start, museums are tasked with so much more. Together you are raising awareness and supporting communities to combat climate change. You are addressing Britain's past and reinterpreting your collections, embedding anti-racism and decolonisation in your work, to ensure your museums are sustainable and accessible for the future. You are providing wellbeing activities and resources that combat isolation and support better mental health. And many of you are doing it as volunteers, in your own time, for free.

That commitment is valuable and extraordinary, and I don't get the opportunity to say thank you enough. Thank you for safeguarding our shared heritage and for the difference you are making to our communities and to Hertfordshire residents.

Your support for each other as museum professionals is particularly evident. Your museums, and your roles within them, are all different but many of the challenges and opportunities presented to you are common. Whatever your commitment to your organisation, as a manager or a volunteer trustee or a freelance practitioner, your work contributes to a joyful creative museum offering which is the core of the heritage landscape in Hertfordshire.

WHO WE ARE

Hertfordshire Association of Museums is a dynamic and active network supporting all people who work for or volunteer in our museums with the aim of increasing awareness and raising professional standards.

The Museums Development Team is part of HCC Heritage Services, and the programme is delivered in conjunction with a service level agreement with MDSE, a sector support organisation supported by Arts Council England.

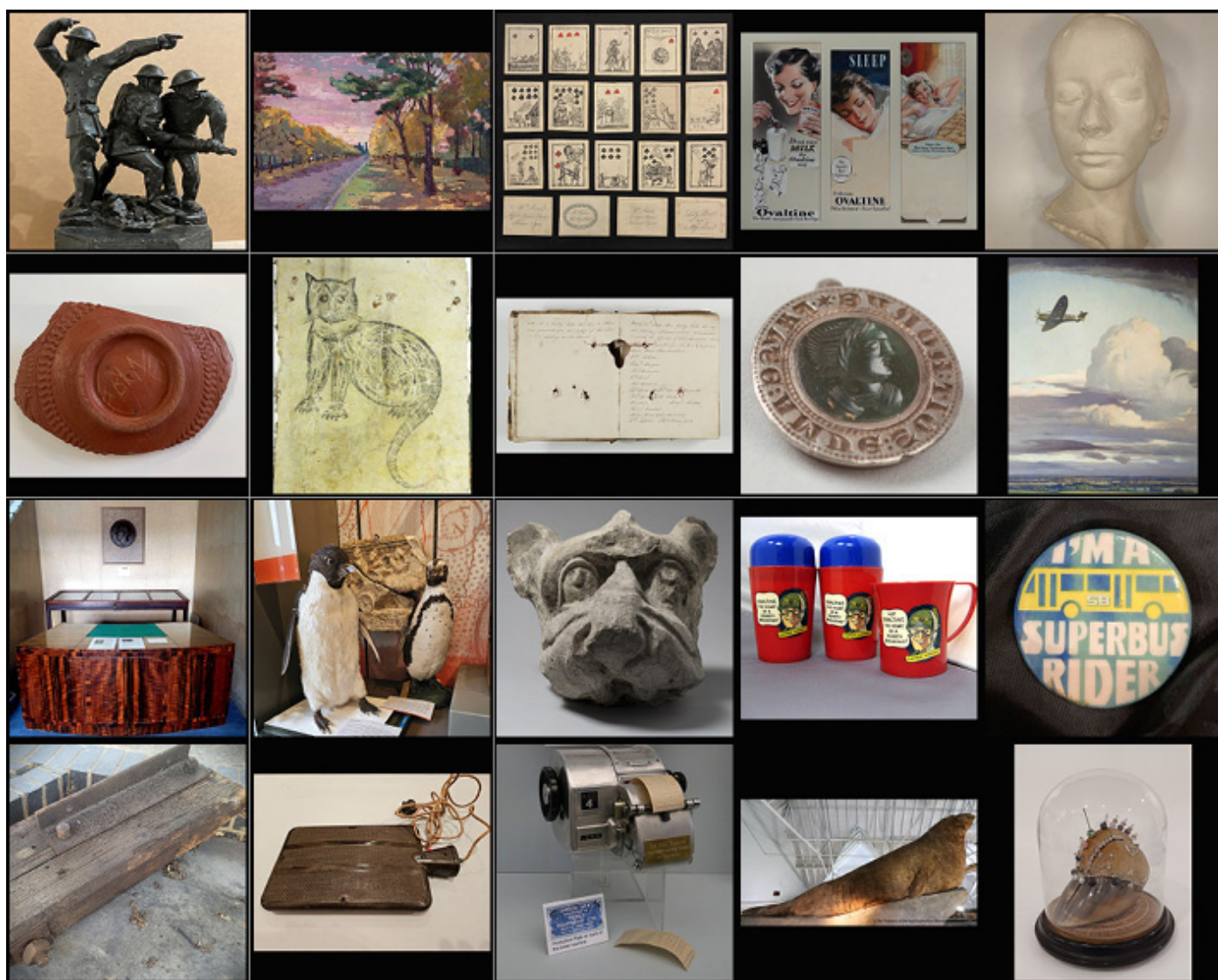
Each year we deliver a programme of training, network events and meetings plus an annual awards event. We also provide individual support to museums seeking advice on a range of subjects including collections care, governance and audience development.



HERTFORDSHIRE ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS AWARDS 2024

We were delighted to hold the sixth annual Hertfordshire Association of Museums Awards Ceremony at Ware Priory on February 15th 2024. On a sunny and surprisingly warm day, guests were able to enjoy the Priory's lovely gardens before sitting down in the Priory Hall to hear John Wing give a fascinating overview of the Priory's history dating back to 1338.

Three awards were decided by an independent panel of judges from outside the County who praised the high quality of the entries, commenting that it demonstrated the excellent work achieved by museums in Hertfordshire.



From top right: Ashwell Museum – Maquette for the National Firefighters Memorial Statue by John Mills; Garden City Collection – ‘Broadway’ by Sylvia Molloy; Knebworth House – Playing Cards made from Georgian Calling Cards; Dacorum Heritage – Ovaltine Maid Painting; Bushey Museum and Art Gallery – Death Mask; Verulamium Museum – Sabina’s Samian Bowl; Hertford Museum – Cat, painted on wall plaster; Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies (HALS) – Essendon Vestry Minute Book; Bishop’s Stortford Museum – Medieval Seal Matrix; Royston Museum – Spitfire Over Bassingbourn; The Bunker Museum at Hatfield Police Station – Frank Halford’s Desk; North Hertfordshire Museum – Penguin Pals; Ware Museum – Pulhamite Grotesque; Three Rivers Museum Trust – Original 1950s Ovaltine Mugs; Stevenage Museum – Superbus Badge; Frogmore Paper Mill – Burnt Beam from Paper Stores; Redbourn Village Museum – Bakelite Hot Water Bottle; Tring Local History Museum – Gibson A14 Ticket Machine; Natural History Museum at Tring – Southern Elephant Seal; Watford Museum – Longland’s Love Token



The award winners were:

Creative Health Award: Elstree & Borehamwood Museum – Recollections Through Art, a project to combat isolation through exploration of local history and art.

Engagement Award: Garden City Collection (Letchworth Garden City) – Forging A Family: Caribbean Harmony in Letchworth Garden City, development and presentation of a co-curated exhibition with Letchworth Caribbean Harmony Group.

Innovation Award: British Schools Museum – Play Café @ The Museum, a new café space with dedicated play area and free activities for preschoolers.

Heritage Hero Awards were also presented to volunteers from museums across the county to recognise their wonderful work supporting museums and communities. Although this is not a competitive award, special mention was made of the volunteers for Hertsmere Museums.

The final award was, as always, the Object of the Year. This prestigious award is decided by public vote and more than 2,300 people voted from a choice of twenty artefacts nominated by museums across Hertfordshire. A wide and eclectic range of objects was put forward: two of the oldest were Bishop’s Stortford Museum’s 14th-century Seal Matrix, lost by its owner over 600 years ago, and from St Albans Museum and Gallery, a bowl fragment inscribed “Sabina”, which dated from Roman times.

This year the Object of the Year award went to Watford Museum’s unusual love token handcrafted from hooves and horns. The trinket was made by a local cobbler William Longland for his wife Bessie and was inscribed with their initials in beads on velvet. Runners-up included Frogmore Paper Mill’s Burnt Beam recovered after a recent fire, and a Southern Elephant Seal nominated by the Natural History Museum at Tring.

The awards were presented by Mark Mills-Bishop, Hertfordshire County Council Deputy Executive Member for Education, Libraries and Lifelong Learning, Danielle Bailey, HCC’s Director of Corporate Strategy & Engagement and Sally Ackroyd from MDSE.

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE MUSEUM FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

The team at North Herts Museum came to the decision that the lives of disabled people were not sufficiently well represented within their collection. Where disabled people were visible it was often in the background, giving the impression that a sector of society that is often overlooked was literally marginalised in their collection.

To redress this inequality they participated in Curating for Change, a scheme developed to create strong career pathways for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse curators, all of whom are seriously under-represented in museums. They were pleased to offer a sixth-month placement to trainee Freya Purcell.

Freya studied the museum collection, looking for existing stories and themes that could be developed. Through exploration and discussion, she settled upon the idea of staging an exhibition on disability sport as a key part of her time with the museum. Her aim was to tell the story of people involved in disability sports at local, regional, national and international level in an exhibition designed to celebrate these athletes and increase awareness of disability sport and its local heroes.

Freya contacted many different local sports groups, clubs and individuals to source participants for the project who were willing to share their story and either loan or donate objects that represented themselves and their achievements. As a result, much of the material displayed was borrowed from people involved in disability sports from across the district.


Museum staff arranged the scheduling of the exhibition, which ran from January 31 to March 26 2023, and offered advice and guidance on how material might be arranged and interpreted.



nh NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE
museum

ADMISSION FREE

31 January – 26 March 2023

 Fully accessible

SMALL GRANTS

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In 2023 we awarded eleven Hertfordshire Association of Museums Small Grants to support museums and fund development or project work. The total sum awarded was £3,520.

Grants were awarded to:

Apsley Paper Trail - £300 towards conservation supplies

Ashwell Museum - £312 for purchase of tabletop display case

Dacorum Heritage - £200 towards improving their online presence with a microphone, Zoom Pro licence and marketing material.

Hertford Museum - £400 towards a consultant to review the museum's activities and identify ways to improve engagement.

Garden City Collection- £300 towards a virtual tour of an exhibition at the Broadway Gallery

Lowewood Museum - £215 for a copy stand to aid with digitisation of the museum's photographic collection.

North Herts Museum - £300 towards the purchase of a scanner to augment the 3D printer recently bought.

Redbourn Museum - £400 towards the purchase of blackout blinds to replace current blinds which are disintegrating.

Royston Museum -£375 towards the development of a children's trail around the museum

Ware Museum - £298 to develop two new loan boxes - Tudor Rich and Tudor Poor

Watford Museum - £420 towards the purchase of six digital cameras



LOWEWOOD MUSEUM

JOURNEY THROUGH LIFE: THE WINDRUSH

Lowewood Museum were approached in 2022 by Pasty Spears, a local resident and councillor who wanted to create a display at the museum to celebrate Windrush Day. Seeing the potential to reach out to the Windrush generation in Broxbourne, the museum staff suggested that instead of a small display that year, they should work towards producing a larger project involving the community.

After first identifying members of the community with stories and artefacts to share, community curators made contact through existing community links and visited people in their homes to interview them. The community curators then created an exhibition that provided opportunities to share artefacts, oral histories and individual accounts within a wider context.

The community curators received training from Lowewood Museum Staff and worked with the Museum Project Manager to install objects and produce exhibition boards. The full exhibition opened for Windrush day 75 in June 2023 and ran until October to incorporate Black History month and maximise opportunities for school engagement. On the evening of Windrush 75, contributors and their families were invited to a private event at the museum to commemorate the day and this was followed by a large community celebration at the museum the following weekend which was rich in song, dance and food.

The ongoing legacy of the project for Lowewood museum has been new links with the Caribbean community and an enriched collection of stories and photographs.



OTHER MUSEUM HIGHLIGHTS

Much Hadham Forge Museum, Lowewood Museum, and St Albans Museum Service were awarded full Arts Council Accreditation at their most recent return. Congratulations to all the staff on their successful applications.

'Perform Transform', a BeeCreative project designed to challenge inequality in cultural access by uncovering and sharing stories of local residents was launched in museums in Watford, Stevenage, Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston museums.

The Hertfordshire Heritage Fund awarded five grants to Apsley Paper Trail (2), Tring Local History Museum (1) and North Herts Museum (2) for the purchase and conservation of art and heritage objects relating to Hertfordshire.

THANK YOU

The Hertfordshire Association of Museums would like to say THANK YOU to the following people and organisations for their support during the last year:

Alistair Hodgson - Bunker Museum
Cathy De'Freitas - Ware Museum
Danielle Bailey - Hertfordshire County Council
Dominic Wall - Hertfordshire County Council
Eleanor Pirie - Natural History Museum
Elena Lewendon- Apsley Paper Trail
Elise Naish - The Culture Trust
Emma Calver - British Schools Museum
Hannah Bentley - The South Asia Collection Museum
Jenny Oxley - Saffron Walden Museum
John Wing - Ware Museum
Luke Clark - Tank Museum
Mark Mills Bishop - Hertfordshire County Council
Paul Kitching - Natural History Museum
Sally Ackroyd - Museums Development South East
Sarah Kerrison - Hertfordshire County Council
Sarah Sinka - Museums Development South East
Ashwell Museum
St Albans Museums Service
Stevenage Museum
University of Herts Arts
Arts Council England and the MDSE Team
Members of the HAM Committee
All the wonderful staff and volunteers at Hertfordshire's museums



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