

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORY

The *Saffron Walden Historical Journal*, launched in 2001, was the successor publication to *Saffron Walden History*, which had ceased publication a decade earlier. Bound copies of this journal can be found in Saffron Walden Town Library. Selected articles have been transcribed by either Hannah Shaw-Ridler or Chris Clarke, and are reprinted here for the use of researchers and others. Permission should be sought from the Saffron Walden Historical Society and the Town Library to publish these articles in any other media.

Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

'STAND AWHILE AND ADMIRE' A History of the Saffron Walden Museum

© Len Pole

Reprinted with minor alterations from: *Saffron Walden History* No 28 Autumn
1985

In September, 1832, three gentlemen strolled across the grass in front of the ruined keep of Walden Castle, deep in conversation. They were talking about the possibility of putting up a building for use as a museum, as well as for other purposes. One of them owned the land; this was Lord Braybrooke of Audley End, nobleman, scholar, and antiquarian, who, in furtherance of his rural interests was involved with the newly formed Horticultural Society and was anxious that it should have a suitable place to meet. Another of the men was Jabez Gibson, of the well known family of maltsters who had recently taken up banking. He was the most interested of all in starting a Museum. The third was John Player, a man of many interests, who had already put together a 'museum' like collection of his own. He retired to Walden after having to give up his job at the Admiralty in London for health reasons. He was an Overseer of the Poor and was at that time developing his ideas about spade husbandry as a practical way of alleviating poverty.

These were not the only people interested in the idea of starting a Museum. They were sometimes joined in their deliberations by Thomas Spurgin, a surgeon in the town. Later in the decade, Joshua Clarke, a maltster, and his brother Joseph also became involved, the former as Hon. Curator, and the latter as a day-to-day administrator. Jabez's brother, Francis Gibson, was also interested at this early stage.

Ideas about the Museum were first put to paper in September 1832, in preparation for the Horticultural Society's Annual Dinner, following the Annual Show. John Player's account in his autobiography appears to be almost a verbatim record of his speech at the dinner. It includes the following: 'In consequence of a proposal of Mr Jabez Gibson's, we have an idea that will soon be at our disposal, at a reasonable rent, a convenient

apartment for our books, into which also may be introduced the first germ of a Museum....and who can say that this little beginning of a Waldensian Museum may not at least rival some in situations less favourable to collectors'. The house was probably the one adjoining what was then called the Cattle Market which was used as the venue for the first meeting of the Natural History Society on November 22nd, 1832. However, it is clear that this was only being used as a meeting place at this time. That the Bury Hills was thought of as the most suitable site for the Museum is confirmed in a letter from Lord Braybrooke to John Player, also quoted in his autobiography. 'What I should most like would be to see the ground between the Church and the Castle converted into a garden and the ruin fitted up as a Museum without the external appearance of the walls being altered or disfigured.' In addition, rough notes in Player's hand, bound into one of the Registers in the Museum, corroborate this. In September, after the site visit with Lord Braybrooke, John Player, Jabez Gibson, Thomas Spurgin, Francis Gibson, and Mr Youngman met at the Castle '...and thought it reasonable to lay out the Bury Hills and build a Museum if it could be done'.

It was done. Lord Braybrooke, in his *History of Audley End*, published in 1838, but written in 1834-35, reports: 'a large Museum was erected in 1833, which already contains a great number of interesting specimens in natural history and other curious objects. There are also rooms provided in the same building for the Horticultural Society, and the members of the Literary Institution, who assemble occasionally to read papers upon subjects not connected with theology or politics'. What is most interesting about this description is that it refers to only that part of the present building west of the Great Hall. The author goes on in his description:

Adjoining the Museum a spacious room, to be called the Agricultural Hall, capable of containing three hundred persons, has just been completed by the author of these pages, as there was no place adapted to public meetings in the town; but the principal object is to accommodate the Walden Agricultural Society.

There is therefore no doubt that a building existed for the purpose of being used as a Museum before 1835; this is confirmed by the terms of the lease drawn up 13 October 1834, between Lord Braybrooke and 12 gentlemen of the town charged with the responsibility of administering the new building (this group later became known as the Castle Hill Society) which refers to 'All that building thereon lately erected and built by the said Richard Griffin Lord Braybrooke and now used as and for a Museum (except the large room at the east end of the said Museum called the Agricultural Hall...' However, there is also no doubt that the adjoining the Cattle Market continue to be used, for according to the minutes of the Natural History Society for 11 February 1835, 'the interval between 31st December and the present has been occupied in removing cases and

specimens from the House so kindly and so liberally lent to this Society since its first institution to the new building on the Castle Hill'. There is no evidence that the house was opened as a museum at any time, and there is plenty of evidence that the new building was not opened as a museum before 12th May, 1835. This comes from the minutes of the Natural History Society, from Player's introduction to the Abridged Catalogue, and from manuscript notes of Nathan Maynard, the father of the first paid Curator of the Museum, who himself started a small private Museum in Whittlesford; 'for 15th May 35 I have been to Walden today to see a new Museum which has been opened this week....in a new building near the ancient Castle....How I should love the opportunity of visiting a collection of this sort when I please. This day set apart for the public at one shilling each – I entered my name in a book kept there for the purpose'. This was the only time non-members of the Society or their guests were allowed in to the Museum before the 1880s. The Museum on the first floor of the new building was being made ready during the first months of 1835, and was duly opened for the first time at 11 a.m. on Tuesday, May 12th, the Revd. Robert Fiske delivering an address to the Company in explanation of the objectives of the Trustees. Refreshments were then served.

From May, 1835, onward, the Museum was open to subscribers on one afternoon a week in the summer months. It closed each winter and was then re-opened in the words of Herbert Collar, a later Curator, 'with great ceremony' each succeeding May, with a lecture by an eminent scholar. The handbills printed each year to remind subscribers of 'the re-opening' and that subscriptions were due stated 'Admission by ticket only'. This arrangement continued until the 1880s.

The first mention of the Museum being more generally open is in Hart's Almanack for 1887 where it is said that application can be made 'on the premises to Mr Maynard, Curator'. In addition, the Almanack stated the Museum to be 'Open 9 – 5 every day, except Sundays, Good Friday and Christmas Day, admission by subscription ticket, order of the Trustees....or application to the Curator'. Somewhere about this time, daily admission without charge commenced, and with the addition of Sunday opening, a tradition started during the First World War, and re-established in 1936, has continued to this day.

What was the Museum like in 1835? Nathan Maynard has left us the only contemporary description by an outsider of what the Museum contained when it first opened. 'Stuffed birds and animals – shells, birds' eggs, nests, skeletons, and several bones of a mammoth – a beautiful rhinoceros, stuffed, which stands in the centre of the room, Indian curiosities, insects, casts of heads, medals, minerals, petrifications, etc., etc, head of an elephant, of a hippopotamus, horse, cow, etc.' The head of

the elephant could be part of the one which was later set up in its entirety.

The story of the elephant is worth telling, since it soon became the single most famous object in the Museum. It arrived, together with a large number of other animals and birds, as a result of a letter written by Hannibal Dunn, one of the founder members of the Natural History Society, to his brother, Robert, of Algoa Bay, South Africa, in 1833. At a meeting of the Committee in December of that year, the receipt of a bill from Robert Dunn for all the items he had sent, amounting to £492.8s.2¼d, was reported. The Committee adjourned to consider its reply to this 'remarkable circumstance'. After some delay the animals arrived and Jabez Gibson agreed to purchase some of them; others were offered to Museums elsewhere. The elephant was one of the animals purchased by Gibson, and was eventually set up in the Museum in 1837. The skin was prepared by Thomas Smith, a local tanner, and stuffed with straw over an iron frame by William Spicer, a blacksmith. The work was directed by Joseph Clarke, who made a model elephant to act as guide. Filling the great skin with straw was obviously thirsty work; in a surviving copy of the bill, 9½ gallons of beer was paid for (at 2s per gallon). The bill totalled £24.1s. The elephant occupied pride of place in the Museum, as can be seen in the frontispiece to the abridged catalogue, published in 1845.

The Museum room very quickly became too small. In 1837, Lord Braybrooke agreed to add two large rooms at the back, one on the ground floor and one above (now the 'Worlds of Man' gallery), together with two other small rooms, referred to as 'a cottage', for the caretaker to occupy. It is likely that the upper of these two rooms was immediately filled with the objects displaced by the arrival of the newly mounted elephant. In 1838 and 1839 the Essex Literary Journal supplied first-hand accounts of the re-opening ceremonies.

The earlier correspondent described the displays briefly, adding that he 'must seize some other hour when the throng is less gay and the laugh less loud to notice in detail the varied relics here gathered...' The lecture on this occasion, by Professor Adam Sedgwick, lasted for three hours!

One of the most notable additions to the collections in 1838, remarked upon by the Essex Literary Journal, was the Lion 'Wallace' (now in 1985 restored to its former glory). He was famous in life as the first lion successfully reared in captivity in this country, having been born in Edinburgh in 1812. He took part in the last and most notorious fight with dogs in Warwick in 1825 and died at the ripe old age of 25 in 1838; this was an especially remarkable age for a menagerie animal, since they were often badly treated and malnourished. He had belonged to Wombwell's

menagerie which was famous throughout the land. George Wombwell was born at Duddenhoe End, and donated a number of animals to what he regarded as his local Museum, as well as to other places, including Cambridge University.

As well as additions to collections, there were occasions when the opposite occurred. The most notorious time was in October, 1842, when a quantity of gold and silver coins were stolen. A surprising element in the story is the speed with which the Trustees acted, particularly Joseph Clarke, who went to London, obtained the consent of Her Majesty's Government to put up half the reward money, obtained a list of the missing coins and had a poster printed advertising the reward of £100, all within two days of the theft. And this before the days of telephones, and even before the railway puffed as far as Wendens Ambo!

There were several suspects, the most likely being John Wright, the son of the caretaker of the building. In December, 1842, an old friend of his called Abbott claimed he saw Wright go into a coin dealer's in Aldgate and sell some old coins. John Wright was arrested and brought before the Saffron Walden magistrates. However, the dealers could not positively identify him and it was not possible to prove that the coins sold were the same as those taken from the Museum. Wright was acquitted. Joseph Clarke was most annoyed at this. In some notes he left he says: '...we do not consider that we have done with either him or the magistrates yet'.

A comprehensive listing of the collections was made by John Player in 1844, and published the following year. It was said to be the first illustrated catalogue to Museum to be published in this country. As well as descriptive chapters, it contained an illustration of the inside of the Museum, with elephant, rhinoceros, giraffe, the panels painted by Cipriani, some Australian aboriginal weapons, stuffed birds and Roman pottery. The catalogue itself included sections on birds, reptiles, fishes, etc., as well as the then popular subject of phrenology, also specimens illustrating the 'habits of various nations'.

This latter topic was becoming a speciality of the Museum which it has maintained with greater or lesser enthusiasm ever since. The first such items were donated by the Marchioness Cornwallis, consisting of samples of lace-bark from the West Indies made up into a child's dress and cap of about 1830. Two early collections, from south-eastern Australia and the Pacific Islands are of international importance. Both were donated by the men who had collected them. John Helder Wedge was a surveyor in Tasmania, whose father lived in Shady Camps⁵, and who was one of the earliest settlers of the Werribee area near Melbourne in 1836. Most of the aboriginal objects were collected there, but some came from New South Wales' aborigines living in Tasmania. The other man was George Bennet

⁵'A History of Saffron Walden Museum' – *Saffron Walden History* No 28 (1985)

who had been employed by the London Missionary Society to insect their missionary stations particularly in the Pacific area. He travelled around the world between 1821 and 1829. His connection with Saffron Walden was tenuous; he knew Revd. Griffinhoofe, vicar of Arkesden, an early supporter of the Museum, and presumably became aware of the Museum's existence through him.

The need for more space to house the ever-increasing collections continued. In 1842, Lord Braybrooke was approached with a proposal to raise the ceiling in the Agricultural Hall and insert an extra floor to be used by the Natural History Society, but this was turned down. A second proposal, for an 'ornamental gallery' at the west end of the Hall, with an entrance from the Museum Room through a doorway in the chimney breast, met with a similar fate, but has recently been revived.

The fame of the Museum was still spreading in the 19th century. This may have been partly to do with the inclusion of the elephant in the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Trustees had agreed to a request from the Exhibition's organisers to borrow it, so that an Indian howdah could be displayed on it, despite its African origins. The removal of the beast from the first floor, down the stairs and out through the front door must have been very carefully executed, as there could only have been a few inches to spare. The sight of it travelling to London (probably by train from the recently-opened station at Wendens Ambo) no doubt created a stir.

Despite the good reputation that the Museum had at this time, finance was becoming an increasing problem. The Trustees had to dig into their pockets regularly, as the Treasurer's account show. Documents from the archives also indicate an atmosphere of decline slowly settling over the Museum between the 1850s and the 1870s. Nevertheless, there were important additions to the collections, including the two clunch mantelpieces from R.D. Thurgood's house in the Market Square, which was pulled down to make way for the cattle market in 1855.

In 1872 the Museum at Sudbury in Suffolk found itself in such a bad way that the collections had to be sold. Fortunately for this Museum, William Murray Tuke attended the sale and bought a number of items, many of which were later deposited here.

A similar fate might have befallen this Museum had it not been for the beneficence of George Stacey Gibson who in the 1880s endowed the Museum in such a way as to give it a new lease of life. It was not simply a matter of direct financial help. Gibson was responsible for the extension of the Town Hall in 1879, which included an Assembly Hall, rendering the Agricultural Hall redundant as a meeting place. It was therefore agreed that the Natural History Society should take over the entire Museum

building. He was also responsible for the payment of the Curator as well as for other expenses attendant upon the re-organisation of the Museum.

The first paid Curator of the Museum was George Nathan Maynard, of Whittlesford. Although he was first employed as a Caretaker, it was soon realised that he had a much greater range of skills than any of his predecessors. Since his father had made collections of his own, Maynard was already familiar with some of the requirements necessary for the proper organisation of museum collections, which was exactly what was required at that time. His first tasks related to the physical movement of material from the first floor to the newly released space in the Agricultural Hall and elsewhere on the ground floor. He also started to keep records of new acquisitions in bound volumes, a procedure which is still kept up today. His Registers are thankfully filled with his drawings which have helped enormously with the problems of identification. In addition, the work which we now call conservation was an important part of his duties, although the treatment methods used in the 19th century are quite different from those in use today. Little distinction was made, for instance, between conservation and restoration, in which some attempt was made to make the object 'look like new'.

One of the many objects moved downstairs in 1880 or 1881 was the elephant, which took pride of place in the new arrangement. The first floor galleries were refurbished to accommodate the increasingly important collections of ceramics and glass, most of which accumulated through the generosity of William Murray Tuke and Henry Stear, who was a local Medical Officer of Health at the end of the 19th century. The Museum was sufficiently improved by 1887 to be given first class status in a report prepared by the British Association for the Advancement of Science. It is a particularly interesting document as it gave for the first time an overall picture of museum provision throughout the country.

In 1904 Guy Maynard took over the Curatorship from his father. He had grown up in the building and perhaps it was this which encouraged the use of the Museum for teaching which characterised his time here. Up to the end of the 19th century, Museums were not thought of as places suitable for popular education. Those who were already knowledgeable could derive some benefit from such places, but others had little point of contact with the museum displays. Although pupil teachers at the Training College had been borrowing objects for a number of years at the end of the 19th century, and proprietors of schools had been allowed to bring in up to six pupils at any one time, there were no concessions to ignorance in the way the Museum was laid out or labelled. Guy Maynard changed the arrangement of one of the ground floor rooms in 1916 so that children could sit down and be shown things from the collections. He also produced a number of explanatory drawings of the way the area of the town looked

during different historical periods, and used other ways of telling children about the development of the town. He was probably one of the first curators in the country to place such emphasis on teaching within the Museum. He also set aside an area for preparation of new displays, another interesting development for such an early period.

The Museum was kept open during the first world war, although it was subjected to heavy wear and tear from soldiers on leave or stationed nearby. After one was caught trying to wrench the donations box off its plinth, visits by soldiers were restricted to the weekends, when military police were on duty at all times.

The Trustees were again concerned about lack of space at that time. In 1913 they bought some cottages in Castle Street behind the Museum (nos. 36-40) with the intention of knocking them down and extending the Museum building northwards. Fortunately for those living there now, the war put a stop to their plans. In 1914 the Curator moved into one of the cottages, releasing his rooms in the museum for displays; local geology was put in one, and the results of the Walden Survey in another. The Walden Survey was directed by George Morris, a history master at the Friends' School, who worked closely with Guy Maynard, and succeeded him as Honorary Curator for some years. The Curator's former living room in the Museum is now part of the special exhibition area. The other cottages were let or later sold.

In 1918 Maynard left to work at Ipswich Museum, where he pursued a distinguished career. After some time he was replaced by Hubert Collar, who had had no previous experience of museums and therefore worked together with George Morris. The Natural History Society experienced another period of extreme financial difficulty in the 1920s and 1930s, in common with many other museums up and down the country. The same problems, of lack of space in an ill-maintained building, beset Mr Collar as they had beset the other curators. In 1923 the so-called bird room also contained tapestries, war relics and oak carvings! Since some finance came from the Natural History Society, he sought to increase its membership; he also solicited help from local societies. In 1921 the Amateur Dramatic Society donated half the proceeds of one of its productions to help the Museum. In 1923 and 1924 the amount put in the donations box declined, but not the number of visitors; this was possibly a sign of harder times, or an indication that the Museum was less well appreciated.

One cause for celebrations during this period was the occasion of the joint centenary of the Literary and Scientific Institution and the Natural History Society and its Museum on July 9th, 1932. There was a reception by members of the Tuke family in the afternoon, followed by short talks held

in the Parish Room, the Museum and the Castle ruins, and a concert, also in the Castle ruins. The confusion which has subsequently arisen about the timing of both this celebration and the recent 150th anniversary stems from the lack of distinction that the organisers of the centenary celebrations made between the Natural History Society and the Museum. As the above account has, I hope, made clear the first formal meeting of the Society took place in November 1832, the first opening of the Museum in May 1835. The two occasions were kept quite separate by William Favill Tuke during his talk on the 'Early History of the Literary and Scientific Institution and the Museum', given in 1932, even though its title is confusing.

With the condition of the Museum building deteriorating and additions to the collections continually being made, it was inevitable that some 'rationalisation' of the older collections would take place. Some of the larger mammals, like the giraffe, were disposed of in the 1920s. During and after the Second World War, attention turned to ethnography collections. The famous Hawaiian feather cloak had been packed away for safe keeping during the war. It had been given to the Trustees by the Rector of Widdington in 1838, he having received it from his brother-in-law, who was chief attendant to the King and Queen of the Hawaiian Islands during their visit to this country in 1824. The cloak is a most splendid and important piece. It was decided after the war to sell through commercial channels, so that repairs could be made to the roof of the Museum building. It was bought by the Royal Scottish Museum, together with a small number of other Hawaiian objects, and is now on display in Edinburgh.

Some other items 'disappeared' with less notice taken of them by the Museum authorities. The period after the war was a time when a few enthusiastic collectors of ethnographica scoured the country's smaller museums knowing they contained many forgotten items. What is surprising in the case of Saffron Walden is that so little of note was disposed of in this way – a pair of feather rosettes and some pieces of barkcloth, some of which were more recently sold at Christies.

Mr Collar retired as Curator in 1948 after 27 years' service. His place was taken by a Mr Andrews, still remembered by some as a gaunt gentleman in a black cloak. When he arrived, he remarked that he found the displays 'a meaningless jumble', but, like his predecessors, he soon learned that it was impossible to do anything meaningful with them in the financial situation that prevailed at the time. However, in 1952, he started a school loans service, offering specimens such as insects, birds, coins, tokens, and stone age items to an increasing number of schools that were interested in using the Museum. It may have been partly the pressure that this interest brought to bear on the Essex County Council which resulted in

small amounts being granted by the Council's Education Committee to the Museum to assist in maintenance. It was also as a result of increasing concern being shown by the Borough Council, particularly through the Town Clerk, Mr H.C. Stacey, that rate support became a regular element in the Museum's finances during the 1950s. By 1957 the Councils were of the opinion that some representation on the Museum's Committee of Management was necessary in view of their increasing involvement. As a result of discussion between all the interested parties, a new body was formed - the Saffron Walden Museum Society, with its Management Committee, in 1958.

New officers were also employed; initially Dorothy Monteith, who had been writing a detailed thesis on the development of the town, followed by Gillian Chapman (later Spencer). It was Mrs. Spencer who put forward and later implemented the most far-reaching changes in the layout and organisation of the Museum since 1880. It involved setting aside some of the areas formerly used for display as storage rooms. The new displays included only a selection of the material available for each topic rather than every object the Museum possessed, as they had done before. The less palatable side to this reorganisation was that many of the natural history specimens were disposed of. This created much controversy in the town, particularly when it was discovered that the new Management Committee intended to get rid of the elephant and other remaining tropical mammals. Despite this opposition, the elephant was sold to a family in Bath, and could be seen for some years afterwards standing beside some trees in a garden. A recent search in Bath has not resulted in a single piece of the skin or framework being located.

The reorganisation work was undertaken with financial assistance from the Carnegie UK Trust. A great number of changes took place, not only in the Great Hall, where new cases were installed, but also in the first floor galleries. The work was continued by Suzanna Davis after Mrs. Spencer left, and later by Graham Hunter. The Management Committee still found it difficult to make ends meet, even with grants from the local authorities (including the Rural District Council by this time). The Committee had once again to consider selling items when the opportunity came in 1966 to purchase the freehold of the old school building in Museum Street. The purchase was agreed, but only at the cost of some valuable gold coins. The increasing maintenance costs of the main building were also giving cause for concern. Once again the problem was temporarily solved by selling collections, but the Management Committee was beginning to realise that to continue to solve the Museum's financial problems in this way would end up with a finely maintained building devoid of collections. A longer term solution was needed.

Whatever is to be said about the reorganisation of local government in 1974 and the creation of the new District Council of Uttlesford, there is no doubt that it came into existence not a moment too soon for the Saffron Walden Museum. After lengthy discussions between the new Council, the Essex County Council and the Museum Society, not to mention consultations with the Charities Commission, alterations to the Society's constitution were agreed. The museum buildings and collections were placed on licence to the District Council, who accepted responsibility for their maintenance and the remuneration of the staff. Thus, for the first time in its existence the Museum was given the possibility of financial stability, which allowed realistic long-term planning to take place. In the past ten years the Museum staff have been able to implement major improvements in every area of the Museum's activities – not just in the galleries but also behind the scenes, with the provision of a conservation laboratory for the treatment of all the varied collections, and with atmospherically controlled areas for the storage of reserve collections and study collections.

The most important project facing the Museum in the next few years was the reorganisation of the Great Hall. The displays had not been radically altered since 1960; in addition, a great many items had been added to the collections since then, within the disciplines of natural history and archaeology, much of which was worthy of display. The project therefore included the insertion of a balcony on the three sides of the room (a distant echo of the plans of the 1840s!) which doubled display space, as well as providing extra study and storage areas. Another important element in the scheme was the lift which for the first time allowed access for the disabled to the whole of the Museum.

Disclaimer: please note that all opinions expressed in articles are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal*. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of articles, but any corrections can be sent to the website editor at saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com