



Dereham Heritage Trust: 2022 activities and 2023 perspectives

Report to Heritage and Open Spaces Committee 24 January 2023

The purpose of this Paper is to report what Dereham Heritage Trust is doing for Dereham.

People like to relate to and understand where they live. A sense of place is a part of personal identity, and we try to contribute to that sense. Research has shown that appreciating a place's heritage will help many people feel happier and prouder of where they live.

Heritage Trust Outcomes in 2022

DHT is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation with about 70 members who run the museum and the town archive and organise monthly talks on local history, archaeology and the wider heritage. We respond to public enquiries and give advice on historical matters to other organisations in the town.

Bishop Bonner's Cottage Museum

Bishop Bonner's Cottages, a row of seventeenth-century cottages, are owned and maintained by Town Council which keeps them in good order. For that we are particularly grateful. We opened the museum two days a week this year from May to September, on Fridays (3 hours) and Saturdays (6 hours), and we appreciate the £1,000 a year grant to help cover the museum running costs. Displays in the museum include:

- The manufacture and distribution of Hobbies fret-working machines and Metamec clocks, both well-known Dereham companies with international reputations. How many councillors still own a Metamec clock on their mantelpieces we wonder?
- The history of Dereham marketplace.
- The famous fifteenth-century Paston Letters edited and published by John Fenn who lived in Hill House in Dereham in the 1700s.
- Domestic life in Dereham in the nineteenth century,
- The history of cottages themselves. We are planning to produce a popular booklet on their construction and history.

We have completed the museum season feeling satisfied with the outcome after we have been closed for two years because of covid. There were 454 visitors in all, 149 on Friday mornings and 305 on Saturdays when we were open longer. This was an increase of 9% on 2019. From the feedback forms which were completed it appears that about half were Norfolk folk. Our team of 20 volunteers kept the museum open at all advertised times except on two occasions because of illness. August was the busiest month. We opened free of charge for the annual Heritage Open Days, a national event to encourage people to explore their heritage. We also took part in Dereham Day on 14th May.

The future: These visitor numbers do not compare well with the figures for Watton, Swaffham and Wymondham Museums, all places with larger and more suitable premises. The new museum in Watton had 5,000 a year before covid and is already back to about half that figure. The museum there has moved into a part of the Town Hall, thus saving the council a considerable sum in council tax in the process. The issue for Dereham is that while our row of cottages is ideal for displaying cottage life before the arrival of modern

conveniences, it is too cramped to present the history and heritage of the town in the way the town richly deserves. Dereham is a market town with a great industrial past, and the story needs to be better presented than we can do at the moment.

The Town Archive

We are grateful for the use of an upper room in the Assembly Rooms as the town's Archive Centre for storing documents and artefacts that cannot be displayed in the museum. There is great public interest in the near-complete set of *Dereham and Fakenham Times*, on loan from Archant, and a wonderful resource for social history. We currently have two volunteers from Gressenhall museum creating an entirely new catalogue of the collection. The archive is also, of course, the place where interested people come to view items which we are unable to display, or to conduct research.

Acquisitions: We have recently purchased two very significant items for the town. One is the **Dereham Hundred Tipstave** from the time of George III (1760-1820) which we bought at auction for £2,358. This is a symbol of authority of office for one of the Chief Constables of the Mitford Hundred. The system for grouping parishes into Hundreds certainly goes back to Saxon times, and originally each Hundred had its own court. The Hundred Constable was a largely ceremonial post responsible for law and order in the area, and his tipstave is a very rare survival of Georgian local government.

The other purchase is a **Skinner camera** manufactured in Dereham, we believe in the late 1880s or early 1890s, which we bought on eBay for £500. The factory run by J.H. Skinner & Co was on Church Street in what is now Aldiss Court behind Myhills. Until recently no Skinner camera had been discovered.

Both will be on display in the museum for the first time this year, and we will bring both to the meeting.

The future: The problem is that the archive room is totally full, and although we have also been lent an attic room in Church House this can only take overflow documents, and the room is unsuitable for heavier items. We have been advised by our professional museums mentor not to use a container as a store because of condensation problems, so we have had to decline an offer of a remarkable collection of Hobbies treadles and associated documents, which is a great loss to Dereham. We believe that this problem can only be solved by the acquisition of more suitable space.

The Town Plan

The Town Delivery Plan, recently published by Breckland Council, says that "Dereham does not exploit its rich heritage...there is more that could be done to celebrate the town's past." We agree.

Unfortunately, the Town Plan does not actually suggest any significant steps that might be taken to improve the situation, and it has no recommendations for action. To fill this gap, we would be pleased to generate recommendations for providing a Museum and Town Archive which Dereham can feel proud of.

Peter Wade-Martins,
Acting Chair of the Dereham Heritage Trust

4 January 2023