



# **The Friends of Colchester Museums**

*Registered Charity No: 310669*

## **Winter Newsletter 2025**

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For up to date news and information, please visit the website for

The Friends of Colchester Museums

**[tfocm.org.uk](http://tfocm.org.uk)**

## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Since the last Newsletter, the second outing of the year has taken place and the programme of talks has continued.

The outing was to Audley End. Initially it seemed that there might not be sufficient numbers interested to pay for the coach, but more members added their names to the list and the outing was successful. The Autumn talks were of a high standard and well attended.

As a trial, two additional talks were held in afternoons. These were popular, with around 45 present at each, and confirmed the decision to hold the 2026 Autumn talks on Tuesday afternoons instead of in the evenings. This is proposed because a high proportion of members find it difficult or unpleasant to come out to the evening talks, particularly in the dark. Although this change from the evenings will inconvenience some members who are unable to come during the daytime, these seem to be fewer in number than those finding difficulty with evening talks.

As John Lydgate said, "You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time." We believe that the proposed mixture of afternoons and evenings is the best compromise.

Joy has arranged a very promising programme for the coming year, with a mixture of new and returning speakers; further details follow in this newsletter.

Castle Museum own a number of paintings, some of which were funded by TFoCM, and we have suggested that it might be possible for some which are not normally on public display to be displayed at The Minories. Talks are ongoing between the Museum and the Minories to see if this can be arranged. If so, TFoCM will fund the costs of the display.

We are very pleased that Avril Lankester has re-joined the committee after a break of several years. And, as always, we will be glad to hear from any members willing to join us.

Earlier in the year people had difficulty hearing some speakers. We believe that the problem has now been resolved, with a change in the microphones being used. But do please let us know right away if audibility is a problem.

It is several years since the charge for entry to the talks was reviewed. In this period the cost of nearly everything has risen, and reluctantly we need to increase the cost by £1, to £3 for members and £5 for others. A season ticket for Spring and Autumn series will now be £30.

Peter Evans, our Treasurer, has been in hospital for a pacemaker to be fitted after a serious heart attack. At the time of writing, he is looking forward to returning home after a period of convalescence. We send him our best wishes and hope for a full and speedy recovery.

My thanks to you all for your support during the year - and wishing you a happy Christmas.

Ray Cantrell  
Chairman



## COLCHESTER MUSEUMS REPORT

### Castle

*Mythical Creatures* is encouraging a steady footfall, but we have had such fantastic weather this year that we are rather playing catch-up regarding income. Figures are improving though, and we are hoping to be back on track for the rest of the year.

The roof works are progressing, with tenders back in for the contracted work on the roof. The decision is being finalised currently and it's looking like work begins in January, with an eight-month expected timeline for completion. This includes addressing the problem vegetation, as well as making good the walls and tiles, reinstating some drainage and completing a replacement of the roof membrane.

Next year, Luke Jerram's art installation *Moon* and related displays follows his previous impressive works, *Gaia* and *Mars*. There will also be a Bronze Age temporary display in the people's showcase for January. These will be the forthcoming Castle exhibitions and we're looking forward to seeing lots of visitors to these.

### Hollytrees

Repair and renewal is almost done; just a few bits needed here and there. Since introducing an admission fee it has inevitably seen fewer visitors, but we have exciting plans for next year, which we'll share with you - but cannot just yet. Do watch this space for something very different soon!

### Natural History Museum

We've applied to our favourite MEND funding stream for financial support to address the tower issues and will hear the outcome in early February. In the meantime, designs are being created by Purcell Architects who are also the chosen architects for the museum redevelopment work. As they are engaged on both projects (same building) the cross-over communication is working very well.

The museum redevelopment planning is progressing at pace and we have contracts in place for Business Development, Evaluation, Community Engagement - several partners,

architects and museum designers. This half-term is crucial for gathering surveys, and consultation from our users and non-users.

A second funding bid will require a strong business plan, supported by an external consultant. This is ‘Tricolore,’ who are exploring the overall vision of this redevelopment project and looking at the entire environment of both church and museum. An exciting project.

*Pippa Pickles*  
Colchester Museums Manager



## HERITAGE OPEN DAYS: REPORT, 2025

This year, Heritage Open Days took place between Friday 12th and Sunday 21st September with Colchester’s contribution to the festival at a record high number of 52 participating venues and guided walks. This compares to 46 in 2024 and maintains the increase seen in the period since the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. The size of this year’s programme meant that events were spread across the entire ten days of the festival rather than being concentrated on the two weekends.



*The interior of Holy Trinity Church will be open for Heritage Open Days this year (photograph: Philip Wise)*

The total number of visitors was 7627. This is up on the figure for 2024 (6925) and is the highest number in the five years since Covid. The programme was especially full this year with a total of 82 individual events, reflecting that some venues chose to open on more than one day during the festival. As in previous years, there was a mix of venues, some having opened regularly for Heritage Open Days for many years and others being new to the event. Amongst the long-standing venues were St John’s Abbey Gatehouse, the Roman Circus, St Leonard-at-the Hythe and the Town Hall. New for

2025 were the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex, North Primary School, Colchester Baptist Church, SPACE Colchester and the Temple-Cox Museum and Library at Cuckoo Farm.

The theme of the festival this year was architecture, and in response two new guided walks were added to the programme, one looking at ‘Colchester’s Lost (and Found) Theatres’ and the other focussing on the Victorian Garrison.

The Castle opened on the first Saturday of the festival and had 2210 visitors, slightly down on the figure of 2622 in 2024 which was a particularly good year. Hollytrees was

open on the same day and visitors there were similarly down on the 2024 figure, at 565 compared to 816 in 2024. The figures at both the Castle and Hollytrees may have been adversely affected by the heavy rain from about 3.00 p.m. onwards.

Elsewhere, the Town Hall saw a record number of 106 visitors spread across two tours. It is thought that the success of this venue was linked to the opportunity to see the refurbished Moot Hall and hear its remarkable organ being played. The latter was also a very popular event. Elsewhere, the Roman Theatre in Maidenburgh Street opened for all four weekend days, rather than just two as in 2024, and had 483 visitors. Lastly, Holy Trinity Church saw a total of 109 visitors join the first guided tours of the interior of the building since 2019.

Other successful venues this year included the Munnings Art Museum, where their Heritage Open Days event was timed to coincide with an outdoor painting event organised by the Norfolk and Norwich Art Circle. Others recording significantly higher figures were the Colchester Arts Centre, the Mercury Theatre, Gray's Summerhouse, St John's Abbey Gatehouse and the guided tours of Gosbecks Archaeological Park and Greyfriars.

For many, the Heritage Open Days leaflet remains an essential source of information and, as in previous years, this was available from the VIC, Colchester Castle, Town Hall and other participating venues, as well as selected hotels. For the first time in many years, we distributed all the leaflets. The leaflet was also available to download from the Visit Colchester website where programme updates were also posted. It is worth noting that we saw the largest amount of print media press coverage in recent years.

The Heritage Open Days page on the Visit Colchester website was the best performing event page in September and hit a peak on 8th September when 929 people visited it in one day, shortly after the press release went out on 4th September.

The top 10 most viewed individual 'site event' pages were:

- Colchester Town Hall
- Jumbo Water Tower
- Colchester Castle
- Peake's House
- Roman Theatre
- Roman Circus Visitor Centre
- Boxted Airfield Museum
- St John's Abbey Gatehouse
- Colchester Cemetery Walking Tour
- Meet and Play the Moot Hall Organ

The Heritage Open Days festival in Colchester would be impossible to run in its present form without the support of local organisations and volunteers, particularly the Colchester Tourist Guides Association and the Colchester Civic Society. Special thanks are due to Glyn Barritt, who has succeeded Ann Turner as the volunteer coordinator, and to Jo Edwards, who was very active in contacting individuals and venues to encourage them to participate in the festival.

The national organisers have announced that the dates for Heritage Open Days next year will be Friday 11th to Sunday 20th September. The theme next year will be ‘Everyday histories of working lives.’ As ever, I am always very interested to receive ideas for new buildings or activities.

It is clear that Heritage Open Days is a much-loved part of the events programme in Colchester. For locals and visitors, it provides an opportunity to experience the heritage of the city and the surrounding area in a dedicated festival. For venues it is a means of promoting their building and their work in the community. In general, it is the occasion in the year when Colchester can really show off its historic buildings and archaeological sites.

*Philip Wise*  
Heritage Manager



## FROM THE BRAINTREE MUSEUM

### A Local Monument to John Ray - Solid Citizen

You will certainly have heard of Isaac Newton, Galileo Galilei, William Harvey, Christopher Wren and Samuel Pepys. However, you may not know the name of one of their contemporaries, John Ray, although his name is renowned throughout the world of Botany and science. Outside the Braintree and District Museum there looms, proudly, a large bronze statue of him mounted on a high plinth. He is very clearly Braintree and District’s most celebrated person and his life, his interest, fascination and tenacity in many fields of science have marked this man out as a person of high standing. Please join me in a journey of discovery and, indeed, ‘journey of a lifetime’ of John Ray.

John Ray was born on 29th November 1627 in the village of Black Notley, just to the south of Braintree. He was one of three siblings - his father was a blacksmith and his mother a herbalist; he undoubtedly learnt many practical skills from his father but it was particularly his relationship with his mother that shaped his life. As a herbalist, his mother frequently took John for walks in and around the village collecting plants for use in herbal remedies; needless to say this was his introduction to the world of plants in relation to their properties and uses. At the age of ten he attended Braintree Grammar School which was then situated in St. Michael’s Church, about two miles from his home. He remained there until the age of sixteen and was recognised by his headmaster as a pupil of unique distinction. His education both revealed and trained his prodigious memory, the methodical and orderly approach to his work and his delight in mathematics and languages. His handwriting was of a high standard and legible to the end of his life.

During John’s formative years, both rectors of Black Notley Church and St. Michael’s Church were educated at Cambridge and one of these, Samuel Collins from St Michael’s, had set up a charity to assist in the further education of ‘worthy scholars.’ From this,

John was granted a scholarship to Catherine Hall, Cambridge, where he studied for nearly two years before transferring to the nearby (and more famous) Trinity College. Here he developed great skills in Greek, Latin and Hebrew, graduating with a B.A. in 1647/8.

Whilst at Cambridge, he started to take walks which re-introduced him to the world of plants that so fascinated him as a child. During these, he began to consider a project that would lead him towards his life's work in the natural sciences. He began to identify and classify plants by genus, species, and varieties according to similarities and differences based on observation. Following from the ancient Greek Theophrastus, Ray developed a comprehensive range of plant classifications which resulted in what is considered his greatest work, 'Historia Plantarum.' This was published in 1686 (and is currently exhibited in the John Ray Gallery at the Braintree Museum).

John Ray also became prolific in the science of zoology and made extensive studies in mammals, birds, fish, and insects. He became friendly with one of his pupils at Trinity, Francis Willoughby, with whom he travelled extensively around Great Britain and then Europe, at a time when roads were very poor and maps were either very basic or non-existent. These travels widely enhanced and increased his knowledge of the plants and animals that he and Willoughby had encountered.

Ray was a man of deep moral conviction and principle and, being a puritan, held a fundamental dislike for rituals and oaths. At the commencement of the Act of Uniformity in 1662 (following the accession of Charles II) he, as a Fellow of the University, refused to sign the necessary oath and as a consequence was unable to practise either as a tutor or clergyman and hence suffered loss of income. Though he had much sympathy within the university establishment, this selfless act had a profound effect on him and his relationship with his colleagues and pupils.

Ray married late in life, to Margaret Oakley, with whom he had four daughters. From the age of 62 Ray became ill, suffering from blisters, chilblains, digestive problems and leg ulcers. Despite these afflictions, he continued to write and publish further works of both a botanical and ecclesiastical nature. On 7th January 1705 he wrote his last letter to his friend, Hans Sloane, relating to his decline in health and unfinished works, and on the 17th of the month he sadly died.

Ray did not 'invent' the science of Botany, but he developed it into a comprehensive and intense study which undoubtedly left an indelible mark on successive botanists, in particular Carl Linnaeus and Charles Darwin. As a frequenter of museums, country houses and similar places of interest I have seen many monuments and statues to famous people but, for me, John Ray's life and achievements have been of truly 'monumental' proportions! And, back in 2017, ITV's *Anglia Tonight* presented a programme about him under the title of 'Solid Citizen.'

*Stewart Seymour*



# **EVENING LECTURES AUTUMN 2025**

## **Harwich and the Kindertransport (2nd September)**

It was after the November pogrom of 1938 that many, mainly Jewish, people realised they needed to get their children out of Germany. Grassroots opinion in Britain was to give immediate help; substantial funds were raised privately, but only later was there governmental support.

Dozens of people risked their lives in this project, including Sir Nicholas Winton, and we heard of others based in Germany who faced death in keeping children safe. As many as ten thousand came to Britain and were saved, but 80% of their parents died in concentration camps. Many Kindertransport children arrived at Harwich and stayed locally while waiting for their new families.

A statue has been erected at the quayside, unveiled in 2022 by Dame Stephanie Shirley who was herself one of these young refugees. It shows five figures: children descending a ship's gang plank. A poignant memorial to those who travelled from Berlin and beyond before eventually reaching England and a new life.

Helen gave a most informative and moving account of this extraordinary evacuation of thousands of children from Nazi Germany.

*Joy Hopkinson*

## **The Gods and Colchester (16th September)**

The Celts were in Great Britain from 600BC to 43CE and celebrated various important dates in the year. They were followed by the Druids who believed in reincarnation and then the Gauls, who believed in the afterlife.

Lexden had several iron age burial grounds - the Lexden mound dates from 15 to 10BC. Stanway also had special burial sites for the members of aristocracy.

Over time, there have been many temples in Colchester of various sizes and disciplines. Often, Roman temples were turned into Saxon churches - most in the classic style of a cross. These include (locally) St Peter's; St Runwald's; All Saints'; St Botolph's and possibly St James'. The base would be of Roman brick with additions and extensions added at a later date.

Roman vaults at St Botolph's became the first Augustine priory in the country, with the earliest rose window in Britain. St Leonard's on Hythe Hill was a Royalist stronghold during the Siege of Colchester and Greyfriars became a Franciscan priory in 1224.

Max Fox gave a lecture filled with details of the progression of religious buildings in Colchester.

*Avril Lankester*

## **Victorian Medicine - Kind Hearts and Coroners (30th September)**

A new sub-title greeted us in honour of my favourite film which, appropriately, features a killer removing various relatives, causing many inquests!

Jane Pearson's detailed talk explained how our ancestors interacted with medicine in the mid 19th century and, particularly, with inquests. When an unexpected death occurred, the body would often be taken to the nearest local pub - there were plenty - and the Coroner would call for a jury of 12 men to be called, including friends, neighbours and workmates. They would ask questions and contribute information to the proceedings, a truly democratic process. Perhaps these were distinctly community events as the town was much smaller then and everybody must have known each other well. From the 1830's to 1900 only three men fulfilled the role of Coroner at about 1600 inquests, some of which were fully researched and presented for us.

This talk opened our eyes as to how ancestors lived then. It's welcome news that Jane is just finishing a book on Colchester doctors of the period to help us discover more about the real Victorian town.

*Peter Evans*

## **Colchester's Roman Circus (14th October)**

After the Roman Circus was identified in 2004, Francis Terry visited the site and saw the base of the starting gates - a development initiated by Emperor Hadrian in the second century. This was evidence that Colchester was a site of major importance, but it is barely visible in the present day. Francis revealed to us the extent of his ambitious vision for the future: that the gates should be built to an authentic design, using brickwork that matched the Roman specification.

This would help make the Roman Circus to become more visible. There are many precedents for modern constructions to attract local people and visitors to historical sites; however, the scheme has met with some opposition, notably from English Heritage. But Francis said that we possess local craftsmen who would be able to create an iconic monument for Colchester, part of an urban space offering links across Southway and back to the city centre.

A lively exchange of views after this stimulating talk showed support for the scheme, but with concerns being voiced as well.

*Michael Connell*

## **The Mark Davies Memorial Lecture: Norman Colchester (28th October)**

Philip Wise was an ideal speaker for this Memorial Lecture as he and Mark worked together for many years, with Philip eventually taking over some of Mark's responsibilities.

After William became ruler of England, he consolidated victory by rewarding key supporters with land. Colchester was in the area given to Eudo Dapifer, his steward. It was the largest town in Essex, with some 4000 people and thriving to such an extent that taxes from the town rose by 500% in early Norman times.

These new lords created strongpoints to control their territories, originally fortified earth mounds, with stone castles replacing them. Colchester has the largest Norman castle in Britain, dating back to around 1075.

This naturally dominated the town, but Eudo also founded St John's Abbey (of which nothing remains from the Norman period) and St Botolph's Priory. Three buildings on this scale made Colchester one of the most significant towns in England. He also founded St Mary Magdalen leper hospital, outside the eastern walls.

There were stone houses in Norman Colchester, constructed largely from Roman remains, one having elaborate cellars as photographed in Victorian times. But apart from the castle and the ruins of St Botolph's, little remains to be seen in the present day.

A fascinating insight from Philip!

*Ray Cantrell*

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## **AFTERNOON TALKS AUTUMN 2025**

### **The History of Boxted Airfield (7th October)**

Construction began on farmland in 1941 with the airfield opening in June 1943.

It accommodated a Fighter Group made up of 3,000 men and 80 aircraft and went on to become the most important US fighter base in the United Kingdom. Jim Howard served at Boxted and was the only fighter pilot to be gain the Congressional Medal of Honour; and eight of the top ten US aces flew from there. A variety of aeroplanes were at the base, including Mustangs and Wolfpacks.

In April 1944, servicemen were moved to Kent to take part in D-Day and the USAF left there in October 1945, with the RAF taking over the airfield.

The Nissan huts on site were used by those returning homeless, with the last residents departing in 1952.

Over the years, the airfield housed a crop spraying business and a gliding club, then in 2000 it became a registered charity. Since then, a thriving museum has been developed,

housed in Nissan huts authentic to the World War II years.

An interesting account from Richard Turner about a special location on our doorstep.

*Liz Anderson*

Boxted Airfield is open on the last Sunday of each month between March and October as well as for special events, including the Heritage Weekend.

## **Growing up in the Dutch Quarter (21st October)**

Roy entertained us with stories and anecdotes about his life as a young boy in Colchester, particularly during the years of the Second World War. He conducted an imagined tour of fourteen town locations, with each one holding vivid memories.

Tales of bombings, seeing German prisoners of war working outdoors and exchanges with American soldiers were very much as viewed through a young person's eyes. We were given a vivid picture of life during wartime, with nights spent in a Morrison shelter, waiting for the Air Raid Warden to knock that all was clear.

The various characters that lived in that area of the city were brought to life by his very personal tales. We almost felt that we knew them, especially his rascally grandfather who had ways of concealing food purloined from the army kitchens, except when a trail of sugar in Vineyard Street gave him away...

However, the highlight must be the way in which he managed to get our members singing along with war time songs - this must be a first for The Friends talks!

*Michael Connell*

## **TFOCM TRIP, SUMMER 2025**

### **VISIT TO AUDLEY END HOUSE**



The sun came out on 4th September as more than 30 members arrived at Audley End House in Cambridgeshire, where we had an opportunity to listen to a talk about the history of the house, explore the building, visit the stable block and to enjoy the beautiful gardens.

Audley End is a seventeenth century mansion set in a landscaped park. Its history is one of fluctuating fortunes.

Thomas Howard, 1st Earl of Suffolk, rebuilt an earlier house created by his grandfather, Lord Audley, and transformed it into a huge mansion. Later it was bought by Charles II as it was very convenient for Newmarket races. However, in 1701 it was brought back into the Howard family, who greatly reduced the size of the house in order to make it more manageable to maintain. And today it is only about a third of its original size.

After being modernised by another owner, who also appointed Capability Brown to create the beautiful, landscaped gardens, in the 1800s it was restored to its original Jacobean character by yet another occupant of the house. The architect appointed to do this was Robert Adam.

During the Second World War it was used to secretly train Polish Special Operations Executives preparing to parachute into German occupied Poland. With such a chequered history, the house was full of artefacts amassed by the many owners over four centuries.

Audley End is now in the ownership of English Heritage and is certainly well worth a visit.

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## **ST LEONARD'S AT THE HYTHE PARISH**

### **– A FURTHER VIEW FROM THE 1890s**

The Autumn newsletter introduced the Rev HT Osborne, an ambitious rector who wanted to publish a parish magazine and also develop a programme of events that would attract a congregation in an area which was facing significant challenges.

Following the establishment of sports clubs, there was an attempt to develop a Reading and Recreation Club, which appears to have been less than successful. The purpose of this was to 'become better acquainted with the working men of the parish, through friendly and unrestricted intercourse and that many would find it a welcome resort for pipe and reading.' However, it was met with 'hardly any response'.

Later it is reported that they tried to introduce 'cards, draughts and other such games' to encourage visits. Poor attendance was also attributed to a lack of a comfortable chair in the room. The Rector reflected that 'a certain lack of social aptitude on one's own part may have been due to the lack of success of the experiment.'

But the Rev Osborne was certainly very hard on himself, because care of his parishioners, young and old, was always much in his mind. He says that 'we hear a great deal about the clergy being out of touch with the male portion of their parishioners to whom they are seldom visible except on Sunday when, as I have heard it said, they are placed "six feet above contradiction."'

He talks about other clergy visiting men in their homes in the evening but says that 'I have never done this....when he comes home tired, he may prefer to be left alone and not be disturbed' and remarks, 'when there is a club going on most nights one or other

of the clergy are to be found, so a man can do as he likes about seeing them'.

However, in contrast, the St Leonard's Musical Society appears to have been very active and popular. They held regular practices each week and gave many concerts.

The account of an 'entertainment' in February tells us that 'unfortunately for the Gleees which were sung by the society, Mr Robins was prevented by a severe attack of influenza from being present and Mr Greenwood, who although he lives 'so far' is 'yet so near' in the sense that he scarcely ever fails to appear on all occasions when required, was obliged to be away on business, and these two were a serious loss. To the uncritical ear however, the gleees were 'nevertheless very pleasant to listen to.'

Other clubs, societies and activities associated with the Church were the Cricket Club, which appears to have been very successful, a Mothers' Meeting, Bible classes, a choir and a Sunday school.

But a new one at the end of 1891 was the St Leonard's Mutual Improvement Society, the object of which was 'to be for the mutual improvement of the members.' Members were invited to speak on any topic but for no longer than five minutes.

Topics included:

Mr. Pike, an evening with Microscope

Mr. Firmin, on the Locomotive

Mr. English, on the Horse

Mr. Pike, a talk on the circulation of the blood in the body with illustrations by means of the microscope

Finally, Mr. Pendred, on Boiler Explosions...

In the July edition, the Rector is concerned with a Bill going through Parliament concerning licensing of public houses. He insists that there are more public houses than are needed: in fact, between the church and the quayside there were approximately seven taverns or beer houses. 'Temperance and restraint' are the paths to God, he notes.

In August he writes about the tragic drowning of a young boy. No details are given about how the incident occurred or the name of the boy. He extols parents to bring up their children strictly: 'your children should grow up with the fixed impression that your word is absolute law'. He continues by telling parents that 'it is impossible to always be watching them, but I think a great deal more might be done to protect them from evil influences by firmly insisting upon their returning home at certain hours, and steadily refusing to allow them to merely idle about in the streets, as well as endeavouring as far as possible to know who their companions are and with whom they are in the habit of associating.'

In the January of 1891, he gives an indication of just how much poverty was in the parish and the town. It was clear, from his reports, that this was a very hard winter,

and he tells of more than 170 tickets for coal and groceries being distributed in the last month, with the hope of more from the Relief Committee. The weather was so bad that all those working on the quayside were made idle for several weeks, and this of course was a high proportion of the residents of the Hythe.

We think of this part of Colchester as a vibrant location with a busy port and many wealthy merchants; however, clearly in the 1890s this was far from the truth. In one of his letters the Rev Osbourne writes that ‘St Leonard’s has acquired the reputation for being the poorest parish in the town’ and ‘...children look more dirty and neglected and there are always more men standing about without work than anywhere else in town.’

The work on the quay was precarious at the time as the port was under decline. However new industries were springing up, there was employment in the gas works, the oil mill, and Mr. Paxman’s Iron works. The influence of Mr. Paxman in the parish is seen in many aspects. In the financial reports his name crops up on numerous occasions, donating money or paying off debts. There are also reports of social occasions involving the Standard Iron Works.

These magazines cover just two years in the life of this 700 year old church and its community, but they give an insight, however briefly, of the community in the Hythe at this pivotal time in its history. An era of extremes, especially in inequality of wealth, precarious living conditions and changes in industry and employment.

*Joy Hopkinson*

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## ROMAN RIVER CONCERT FESTIVAL 25TH ANNIVERSARY

### Jaywick Tower Performance

When the British Mediterranean fleet was attacking port defences on the island of Corsica in 1794, they were unexpectedly repulsed by a small fort with guns pointing out to sea. Despite their superior firepower, HMS Juno and HMS Fortitude had to turn away from this location - Mortella Point. This was the seed of an idea for the defence of the British coastline but a wrong spelling in military dispatches resulted in our designing and building Martello Towers!

The construction of Jaywick Tower began in 1809. It had three levels: an open gun platform at the top, a living area for soldiers on the ground floor, and a basement for storage. Towers on the east coast were each constructed from about 750,000 bricks (at a cost of £2,000-3,000) and designed to survive even the fiercest attack. Jaywick’s bricks were transported by barge from Kent and laid in a complex interlocking pattern around a central, circular-domed shape.

And although it was armed and manned in readiness for combat, the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815 - with the guns being removed four years later. Since then, among other



things, it has been home to an army pensioner, a piquet station in World War I and a Home Guard lookout post in the Second War. After this, it was a storeroom and refreshment room for a caravan park - so quite a colourful history!

But after purchase by the County Council in 2002, it was opened to become a thriving community space and cultural attraction.

Knowing this, Roman River Music Festival arranged for Orlando Jopling, cellist and Artistic Director, to perform in Jaywick Tower. An unusual space, perhaps, but Orlando has always been committed to finding distinctive locations for concerts: a disused bus station, the Tank Room in Jumbo and the extraordinary St George's Hall, hidden behind the High Street's Centurion pub.



He believes that each building has a resonant note, so you have to work out which one that is so that you can play with it and said, 'The spaces I fill are small and resonant, so are big in their acoustic.' He certainly appreciated playing his cello on the first floor of the Martello Tower - designed to house the soldiers - but had never been in a building like that, in what he called a 'doughnut- shaped space.' Orlando dislikes rectangular, box shaped areas, calling them 'acoustically terrible ... where the music bounces back and forth.'

He found that the texture of those interlocking bricks and the vaulted ceiling made this a special place in which to play, helping the sound to spread. Orlando's recital began with the Cello Suite No.2 by Bach, continuing a tradition of playing these pieces in heritage locations throughout England, on occasions in churches to raise funds for restoration. In fact, he has raised more than £165,000 for this cause during his career.

A more contemporary piece followed, Benjamin Britten's First Cello suite composed in 1964, which received its premiere just up the coast, at Aldeburgh. And Orlando was always aware, whilst playing, that Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft and spent many of his Aldeburgh years in a house which was situated right behind the beach.



Orlando told me that, 'The proximity of the sea is in the DNA of Britten's music.' He found the feel of the Martello Tower and the colour of the North Sea very fitting for the music which he played for a privileged Roman River audience on that day.

To Orlando, Roman River concerts mean, 'The act of people coming together to experience a piece of music... partnering excellent music with venues that create a truly incredible experience.' This was



certainly achieved at Jaywick Martello Tower, and of course we look forward to the exciting use of our local Heritage Sites in the 2026 Spring and Autumn concert series.

*Michael Connell*

*With grateful thanks to Orlando for his time spent assisting with this article and also to Max Parfitt for allowing the use of details from his notes in the Roman River Music Festival 2025 programme.*

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## THE MINORIES ART GALLERY, PAST AND PRESENT

My Mother, Ena Robinson, as she was then, worked at the Minories when she was a young parlour maid there in the early 1930s. She was employed by Dr Ruth Bensusan Butt and her husband John, who was an accountant. As well as being one of Colchester’s first female doctors, Dr Bensusan Butt was a town councillor, a member of the Fabian Society and a leading local socialist. Mum looked up to her and enjoyed working for her, finding it interesting. She also was involved with the family’s children. Later she met one of them, John Bensusan-Butt, an artist and architect, when he was campaigning to be our local councillor. When I was about eight, Mum and I were waiting for a bus, when an elderly black car was driven very unsteadily past us. “That’s Dr Butt,” she said. Much later, I was introduced to some of her grandchildren and told them the story. They laughed and said that sounded like her driving.

Although the Minories garden was much the same at the time mother worked there, the building itself was half the size, as number 73 was purchased and added to number 74 High Street in about 1990 by the Victor Batte-Lay Trust.

*Peter Evans*

### The Minories Art Gallery

The Colchester Art Society exhibition will be held here in December, between Wednesday 3rd and Sunday 21st and all gallery spaces will be used for this showcase of local work. Also on that Sunday, there will be a botanical casting workshop with Becky Rix, who is one of only four specialists in the country who can deliver these sessions. Festive plants such as holly and mistletoe are pressed into clay, then cast and painted, to make a unique seasonal decoration. only four specialists in the country who can deliver these sessions. Festive plants such as holly and mistletoe are pressed into clay, then cast and painted, to make a unique seasonal decoration.

Please note that, although the Minories will be then closed for the holiday period until Wednesday 7th January, there will be a special open day on Sunday 27th December when workshops and art activities will take place. If you needed some relief from the

round of festivities, you'd be welcome to join in!

In the new year, running until 22nd February, there will be an Anglian Abstract exhibition, showcasing work from the East of England. Further exhibitions and workshops are still at the planning stage, and details will appear on the Minories website when details are finalised.

Apart from Christmas The Minories is open from Wednesday to Sunday. All details are on: [www.theminories.org](http://www.theminories.org)

**The East Anglian Folklore Centre (on the first floor of the Gallery)**

As always, there are plenty of Winter Solstice events in store for you at the Centre, upstairs at the Minories.

For seasonal purchases, we have the work of 46 artists in a variety of styles and media, including pictures, ceramics and jewellery work on display. There is also an eclectic range of teas and soaps for sale: something for everyone! A straw work and corn dolly maker has her work on display. These include ‘countryman’s favours,’ which workers would have once worn at hiring fairs as a badge of their trade, displaying horsehair or wool. There are also harvest tokens such as the knotted designs given to loved ones. Here is an affordable and individual source of Christmas gifts!

Looking forward to 2026, there will be a Burns Night event taking place in the Commons Café, downstairs at The Minories. In cabaret style, this will include performance poetry and music - of course, it’s on Sunday, 25th January. Tickets are available at:

[eastanglianfolklorecentre.co.uk](http://eastanglianfolklorecentre.co.uk)

To help ensure the continuation of our Centre through the year, a fund-raising event will take place at the Arts Centre on Friday, February 6th. Wonderful folk music will be played by the band ‘Stornaway,’ who will be performing at the Albert Hall in the following month!

And there is, tantalisingly, a possible tie-up with the Essex Wildlife Trust at Bottengoms Farm near Wormingford, home of the late Ronald Blythe. He always wanted this house to be a venue for music and storytelling, so who knows? Any further news of events will appear in the Spring newsletter...

*The Minories Team*

# THE HARWICH MUSEUM

## Kindertransport Display

*"I am Lili.*

*I am Austrian.*

*I am eleven years old.*

*I silently waved goodbye to my weeping mother behind the closed train windows as the train pulled out of Vienna at midnight on the last Kindertransport in April 1939.*

*I do not know where I am going.*

*I do not know if I will ever see my mother again."*

Lili is one of about 10,000 mostly Jewish refugee children who arrived in Britain between December 1938 and September 1939 when World War 2 broke out.

In fact, Lili's mother's heartbreaking last-minute decision to put her only child on a train to nowhere, saved Lili's life. By the end of September 1939, every Kindertransport from Vienna had been halted.

Had she stayed, just four months later, Lili would likely have perished along with her mother and the rest of her family, unable to escape Nazi Germany.



Travelling in crowded carriages, we can follow Lili's train - in parallel with other terrified and bewildered children on journeys from Berlin, Prague, Gdansk and Hamburg - as it reaches the Hoek of Holland from where the children board basic ferry boats to make the overnight crossing to Harwich.

Seasick and exhausted, speaking no word of English, Lili and the Kindertransport children of Europe disembark in the early morning and experience their first glimpse of freedom, the wondrous sight of a smiling policemen, and a warm Harwich welcome for Europe's Kindertransport children, escaping Nazi oppression.

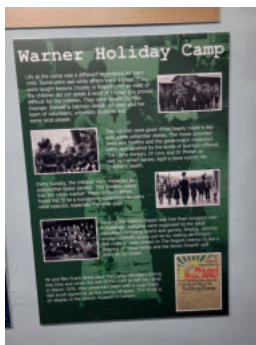
Lili's journey was repeated some 10,000 times. The UK waived visa restrictions for children under 18, but only once a hefty £50 bond was deposited for each child so as not to come out of the public purse.

From Harwich many, including Lili, went immediately on to Liverpool Street by train to be met - or not met - by their sponsors.

But some 2,000 children remained in Harwich, well cared for, at the Dovercourt Bay Holiday Camp until a suitable sponsor could be found for them.

That unique act of mass rescue of Europe's child refugees is vividly recalled at the Harwich Museum, situated just inland from the main point of entry for most of the children who found refuge in Britain.

On the ground floor of this five-year-old museum in a former clothing factory, hundreds of artifacts, photographs, letters and re-creations of the scenes at the harbour as the children came ashore, are sensitively assembled to give a visual and vivid reminder of the trauma of the Kindertransport children.



With a particular emphasis on narrating the Kindertransport story to a new generation, the colourful displays are aimed at teenagers and younger people who are encouraged to feel for themselves the anguish felt by that unique generation almost 90 years ago.

With clear narrative boards, life-size models and the personal belongings of many of those for whom Harwich represented an opportunity to lead a new life, the Harwich Museum also contains volumes of the personal testimonies of many young people who made successful new lives in their adopted country.

And among the greatest treasures is a replica of the internationally-famous Nicholas Winton scrapbook - a collection of documents and photos revealing his secret operation to rescue 669 children from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia during the Kindertransport years - and discovered in 1988 by his wife, hidden in the attic of the family home.

*Anne Sherer Broom*

*Many thanks to Tony Tarran and David Whittle for their invaluable help on the visit to Harwich - veritable mines of information!*

*Please note that the Museum is closed during December and January, but do check their website in the New Year for details of the 2026 re-opening: [contact@harwichmuseum.co.uk](mailto:contact@harwichmuseum.co.uk)*

## TALKS FOR 2026

Please note that talks from April until June will still be held at 7.30pm. However, the talks from September onwards are at 2.30pm.

We would very much appreciate feedback, giving your thoughts about these timings.

We start the season with our friend, Peter Jones, telling the history of Codd bottles and the local fizzy drink industry. Then Peter Walker, who has spoken many times to members, will continue the fascinating story of maps, ranging from the very first surveyed map to the first Ordnance survey map of Essex.

We are all waiting to hear more about the redevelopment of Holy Trinity church, whose Anglo-Saxon tower is one of the oldest buildings in Colchester. Philip Wise (Heritage Manager at the Museums) will give us an update and include his own research into the history and architecture of the church.

We are then 'at sea' with the next few talks. Liz White will entertain us with gruesome tales of the Colchester prisoners who were transported, and Andy Schooler will relate the story of Christopher Jones, the Master of the Mayflower. Captain Jones completed at least two journeys to the 'New World' with pilgrims in 1620.

Benjamin Lay was an important figure in the anti-slavery movement in the USA in the eighteenth century. However, he was born in Colchester, so his story starts in our city. Dorian Kelly has completed extensive research into his life and times.

Water still dominates with our last talk of the Spring/Summer season. Patrick Denney will give an historic and sometimes hilarious look at water supply and privies through time.

In September we start the programme of afternoon talks with our Chair, Ray Cantrell, speaking about carvings in Colchester. This is followed by a story of 'courage, valour and distinguished service' about Squadron Leader Tom Cullen, a Colchester Royal Grammar School boy who was a medical officer in the RAF. Having been captured by the Nazis, he escaped from the island fortress where he was being held and was one of only a few RAF POWs to make a successful 'home run' back to Britain. After the war he helped to build the NHS as a consultant surgeon. His 'Boys Own' story is revealed by author Michael Green.

Emma Palmer, a journalist for the Gazette will tell us stories about Essex poisonings. Our County was at one time considered the 'arsenic poisoning capital' of Britain!

As it is possible that the Bayeux Tapestry will be coming to the UK during 2026, we will learn more about this masterpiece from Mark Mitchel.

To finish the Series we will have our annual Mark Davies Memorial Lecture, in which Ben Paites from the Museums staff will be speaking to us - more details of this to follow.

*Joy Hopkinson*

## WINDOW PROTECTION AT ST LEONARD'S

The Friends of St Leonard-at-the-Hythe in Colchester are celebrating after securing a grant of £7,500 from Enover Community Trust to provide mesh protection to four stunning Victorian stained-glass windows made by the famous London manufacturer Heaton, Butler and Bayne and considered vulnerable to damage.

Angela Haymonds, Trust Manager, said: "The stained-glass windows at St Leonard-at-the-Hythe are truly wonderful, so the Trust was very pleased to provide the grant to ensure they are adequately protected. We hope that, with greater awareness, more people will be able to use the church and enjoy the historically important windows. This Grade II\* listed church is a medieval architectural gem with a wonderful hammerbeam roof and has been in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust since 1985."



We got there! The four stained glass windows not protected from vandalism or accidental damage now have mesh protection - that's all of St Leonard's fine windows now protected. The unprotected south porch window was also similarly fitted.

The process was far more of a slog than anticipated but it all came good in the end. Our chosen contractor, Craftsman Glass, is happily locally based in Tiptree (one of the few companies nationally that seemed interested in such work).

As soon as the funding was in place, cardboard templates were made for each window. The black powder coated stainless mesh was then locally formed in Ipswich before being fitted.

Our sincere thanks go to Enover for the grant, but also to a Friends of St. Leonard's volunteer who most generously made up an unexpected financial shortfall to enable completion of the project.

# Gill Bird's Quiz

Answers on page 18

This edition was being compiled when the clocks were put back 1 hour, as British Summer Time ended. So the Winter Newsletter Quiz is all about time.

- 1: When was British Summer time first introduced?
  - A 1910
  - B 1916
  - C 1939
- 2: When was TIM the speaking clock launched?
  - A 1936
  - B 1938
  - C 1940
- 3: Around when did mechanical clocks first appear?
  - A 1190
  - B 1230
  - C 1275
- 4: When was Greenwich Mean Time adopted as a world standard?
  - A 1884
  - B 1890
  - C 1900
- 5: Who decided there were 60 minutes in an hour?
  - A Persians
  - B Sumerians
  - C The Babylonians
- 6: How many minutes before Colchester does the sun rise in Clacton?
  - A 2 mins
  - B 4 mins
  - C 6 mins
- 7: When did the County Standard announce that the Head Street Post Office clock would show London time and not local time?
  - A 1874
  - B 1884
  - C 1894
- 8: When were the "Greenwich Pips" first broadcast?
  - A 1922
  - B 1924
  - C 1926
- 9: What was the surname of the Colchester firm of famous clock makers?
  - A Rose
  - B Bush
  - C Hedge
- 10: In which cathedral is the world's oldest (1386) mechanical clock?
  - A Wells
  - B York
  - C Salisbury





# THE FRIENDS OF COLCHESTER MUSEUMS

## Spring & Autumn 2026 Lecture Series

**£3 per talk (£5 for non-members)**

**EVENING LECTURES at Lion Walk Church – Tuesday at 7.30 pm**

<b>7 April</b>	<b>On the Bottle</b> <i>Codd bottles and the local fizzy drink industry</i>	<i>Peter Jones</i>
<b>21 April</b>	<b>The County Maps of Essex, 1576-1805</b> <i>From first surveys to Ordnance Survey mapping</i>	<i>Peter Walker</i>
<b>5 May</b>	<b>The redevelopment of Holy Trinity Church</b> <i>His research into its architecture and history</i>	<i>Philip Wise</i>
<b>19 May</b>	<b>Transportation and Colchester Convicts</b>	<i>Liz White</i>
<b>2 June</b>	<b>Captain Christopher Jones: The Mayflower Voyages</b> <i>His journeys with pilgrims in 1620</i>	<i>Andy Schooler</i>
<b>16 June</b>	<b>Benjamin Laye, Colchester-born abolitionist</b> <i>An important 18th Century anti-slavery campaigner</i>	<i>Dorian Kelly</i>
<b>30 June</b>	<b>‘To Fetch a Pail of Water’</b> <i>Water supply and privies through time. (Following AGM at 7pm)</i>	<i>Patrick Denney</i>

**AFTERNOON LECTURES at Lion Walk Church – Tuesday at 2.30 pm**

<b>1 Sept</b>	<b>Carvings in Colchester</b>	<i>Ray Cantrell</i>
<b>15 Sept</b>	<b>Unspoken Valour: Squadron Leader Tom Cullen</b> <i>Distinguished service and escape from captivity</i>	<i>Michael Green</i>
<b>29 Sept</b>	<b>Toxic Tales from Essex History</b> <i>Essex: the arsenic poisoning capital of Britain</i>	<i>Emma Palmer</i>
<b>13 Oct</b>	<b>The Bayeaux Tapestry</b> <i>A background to 1066 and questions still to be answered</i>	<i>Mark Mitchel</i>
<b>27 Oct</b>	<b>The Mark Davies Memorial Lecture</b>	<i>Ben Paites</i>

Further information from Joy Hopkinson, Programme Secretary

*[joyhopkinson1010@gmail.com](mailto:joyhopkinson1010@gmail.com)*