

Chairman's Report

Caring for the Past; Informing the Future

Thank you all for coming tonight. The museum is very grateful for all the support given by its members and volunteers.

When I was thinking about what to say tonight, two things struck me about being involved in Blandford Town Museum:

1. There's a sense of movement forward with the museum: progress made with increasing numbers of visitors, volunteers and members; new projects and new or increased grants
2. A sense of belonging to a community of people who care about their locality and its history and who care for each other.

So what progress has been made in the last year. Visitor numbers have continued to grow after the pandemic and lockdown and Sylvia will discuss the numbers in her presentation. This is reflected in the fact that both Dorset Council and the Blandford Town Council have increased their grants to the museum. It is a mark of their faith in Blandford Town Museum to contribute to the cultural life and the tourist industry in this area.

Most importantly, UK museums are accredited every few years by the Arts Council. The Museum Accreditation scheme ensures that museums manage their collections properly, engage with visitors, and are governed appropriately. Without this accreditation, we cannot apply for the grants we need to keep the museum open. I am pleased to say that thanks to Sylvia's hard work, with help from trustees, our application for accreditation was submitted on time and our accreditation was renewed. We should also acknowledge the groundwork laid by Dr Peter Andrews, who submitted the original accreditation application when he was Curator of the Museum

We were also extremely fortunate to be chosen as one of our previous Mayor, Hugo Mieville's special charities for 2023/24 and we are very grateful to him and his wife Yvonne for their support.

We have also received a couple of bequests in the past year from Beryl Skelly and Michael LeBas. This has made a big difference to our income for the year and we would urge all of you to consider adding the museum as a beneficiary in your will, even for a modest amount.

It may seem very mercenary to hark on about money, but the museum has significant running costs (such as energy, insurance, conservation costs and publicity) which it has to cover just to keep the doors open. And we are lucky in having so many wonderful volunteers who give their time for free.

I mentioned various projects that the museum is undertaking. Sylvia is going to talk more about the project to add QR codes to our exhibits to make our museum much more accessible to people with a visual impairment and also the work of the environmental group.

I will say a little more about two projects that I have been involved in: the large embroidery called Medieval Women in the Dorset Stour Valley and also the production of a book on the 1831 Riots in Blandford.

There are about 13 of us involved in the embroidery group. We have been researching the lives of medieval women and have produced a series of embroidered pictures showing the sort of tasks that medieval women would have undertaken, from black smithing to bee keeping to milking cows. The border of the hanging displays pictures of plants and animals that would have been found in this area in medieval times. We are planning to take the embroidery to schools and village halls in

the area (from Fiddleford to Shapwick) to talk about our research and also to pass on embroidery skills to younger generations. We have just submitted a grant application to mount the embroidery in an easily portable fashion.

The other project I mentioned was the production of the book: *Riot, Reform and Transportation: Blandford Riots of 1831*. This has been written by Barry Barnett, who went to Blandford Grammar School and who produces the blog: *The Blandford Express*. The book is being published by the Museum and we hope will be available this autumn. The book emerged from a talk given by Professor Steve Poole and Dr Roger Ball of the University of the West of England, two years ago on the riots that took place across the country in 1831, prior to the passing of the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Another product of this research will be a soundscape of the Blandford Riots. This is an app which allows you hear a recreation of the characters and events that took place in different spots in the town. A sort of mobile radio play.

So there is always something to get involved in and we are always on the lookout for new areas to explore about Blandford and the surrounding district. And I would just like to empathise this point. Although we are called the Town Museum (to distinguish us from the Fashion Museum), we are here to tell the story of Blandford **and** the surrounding villages.

The second benefit I referred to from being involved in the Museum is the sense of community. You are all a lovely bunch of people and its great fun to work with you. Obviously, the museum would not exist without our volunteers but we also welcome the opportunity to meet with other members who come to talks and our social events in the Garden.

We are so fortunate in having a dedicated group of stewards who work really hard to make the visitor's experience to the Museum interesting and rewarding. Their success is mirrored

in the many complimentary comments we receive. Praise is due to Nessa Hickish and Clara Tavernor for their work in organising the stewards and making sure everything runs smoothly. We are constantly on the lookout for new stewards, as we would like to open the Museum for more than the current four days a week.

For several years, the trustees have taken the view that we should not be charging an entrance fee to the museum and comparison data shows that visitor numbers are much higher when there is no charge for entrance. This means that shop sales and donations are vital contributions to our income. Terry Cooper and Lin Johnson have done sterling work in stocking the shop and increasing sales.

Another important source of income for the museum is our programme of events and talks. An events group has been established and an exciting programme of talks, was presented in the past year, including talks on subjects as varied as using AI to predict neolithic sites, to local agriculture: now and then; to Boots Lending Libraries; to the Health of our Seas.

Thanks also go to Edrys Lupprian, John Earley, Rex Badgley, Gerald Killingworth and Gisela Pauley for their work running the Archaeology Group and organising their talks. John Earley stepped down this year as Chair of this group but he deserves warm thanks for the many years of service that he put into this aspect of the museum's work.

Alongside these talks, the Museum also has a programme of social events: coffee mornings on the second Saturday of the month and drinks and supper on the last Friday evenings in the month during the summer in the Museum Garden. Thanks go to the members of the Events Group, who organise the events and make the food and also the Museum's Victorian Garden

Group who work so hard to provide a lovely setting for the coffee mornings and summer evenings in the garden.

I also want to thank our curatorial team who work with Sylvia to record and display our artifacts, Tessa Pearce and Carolyn Martin, who also work with our archives team: Mark Churchill, Pippa Lausen, Carol Argles and John Tory to answer queries from all over the world about Blandford's past and its residents.

Our Education Team: Nigel Connelly, Sue Fletcher, and Chrissie Wathen-Neal- work with school groups and the many young people who come to do work experience at the Museum, and this is vital in encouraging interest in Blandford's past among the younger generation.

Thanks should also go to Anne Quinney for her work organising our temporary arts displays and particularly the work she has preparing the displaying the very generous donation of Alfred Steven's work and equipment, made by Duncan Steven, the great grandson of Hugh Stannus, who was mentored by Alfred Stevens.

Our webmistress, Shirley Dickinson, continues to do a magnificent job of pulling together information about the Museum, communicating it in a clear and attractive way and keeping it up to date. It is a great way to find out what is going on at the Museum. Just google Blandford Town Museum to see for yourself. <https://blandfordtownmuseum.org.uk/>.

Also thanks to Chrissie Wathen Neal, who manages our social media and Jan Walker who organises our publicity.

The former Blandford and District Civic Society is now an integral part of the Blandford Forum Museum, Heritage and Arts Trust. Nicci Brown has continued to play a key role in issues to do with the built environment in Blandford and is a mine of information on what's going on in the town. The Civic Society organises guided tours of Blandford which are very

interesting and well worth joining if you get a chance and I'd like to record our thanks to the guides, Clare Lowes, Liz Rawlings and Colin Fletcher.

Blandford Museum also hosts the Blandford Sustainability Forum which organises environmental events such as sustainability fairs, tree planting, rubbish collection, and working to make Blandford a "Plastic Free" town. The next Green Fair will be on Saturday 13 July under the Railway Arches. It is worth mentioning here that we were very fortunate to have the services of Thea Batty during the autumn of 2023, a Bath Spa graduate, who put together the exhibit on shopping through the ages, which is currently in the museum, which considers issues of sustainable shopping. Thea also ran an Ethical Mending workshop in April to help people recycle clothes.

Before I finish, I would like to say a few words of thanks to particular people. Thank you to Bob and Judy Adams, who have been trustees for some time now but are stepping down due to personal reasons. Bob was our Vice-Chairman for several years and Judy stepped in the breach to become our secretary. I also want to say thank you to my daughter, Franki Campbell, who took on the Treasurer's role last year when we were without a secretary, despite working full time and living in Gillingham. This wasn't the easiest arrangement for her and I am really pleased to say that Heather Packwood, our Membership Secretary, took over the Treasurer's role as well, at the beginning of this year, ably assisted by Colin Fletcher, who is now our book-keeper, as well as a myriad of other vital tasks that he performs for the Museum.

Lastly I want to say a particular thank you to two people: Sylvia Hixson Andrews, our Director is the driving force behind this museum and has continued to give her all in the past year despite several periods of ill health and her caring responsibilities. Sylvia works almost full-time at the museum,

on a voluntary basis and her understanding of the museum world and her knowledge of how to apply successfully for grants has been invaluable.

The other person is Clara Taverner, who, with Nessa Hickish has taken on the role of co-ordinating the stewards, making sure that they understand what is required of them and that they have the resources they need. I understand that it is Clara's birthday this weekend, so perhaps she would like to come forward for this small gift.

Thank you.