

Felixstowe History and Museum Trust. Chairman's report 2023.

I am pleased to report that 2023 has been a successful year, in many respects, and has built on the post-pandemic growth in 2022. Visitor numbers have increased in line with our extended opening hours, revenue has grown, even though many other visitor attractions have reported a slow-down, and our new arrangements for the Café have produced a significant improvement to our financial stability.

We have new volunteers, a more stable arrangement for the Management of the Museum and have enjoyed both national and regional press coverage.

The year started with the departure of Andy Calver, the former Curator, who we could not afford to continue to employ. This was followed by the decision of Barbara Matthews, a long serving and much-loved volunteer, to stand down as a volunteer and from leading the operation of the Café. This meant that we needed to make new arrangements for the Management of the Museum and Café before the start of the new season.

Following on from our previously expressed intent to work more closely with the Fort we approached the Fort Trust and asked if they would take on responsibility for the day-to-day operations in the Museum if we paid for an additional member of staff in their Management Team. The Fort agreed to this request and in March Debbie Martin, a former volunteer at the Museum, was appointed as Assistant Manager.

It has taken some time to "bed in" these new working arrangements but the new Management group, led by Nicola Barker, has bought some stability to the Museum, and helped us weather events that might otherwise have proven to be crises. We have also been able to improve our compliance and most importantly have reduced our dependence on single individuals.

Also in March, we came to an arrangement with Tracy Richer to operate the Café for us on a profit share basis and thus the Beehive Café was born. Tracy has her own successful business in Beach Street so came to us with strong recommendations. She has subsequently thrown herself into this new venture with a great amount of effort and commitment. The result has been that the revenue from the Café has increased by a multiple of twenty and our earnings from it by around five hundred per cent. Additionally, there is no doubt that people who might never have come to the Museum have been drawn in by the Café and it has a very strong brand, taking its name from HMS Beehive, which felt appropriate and meaningful for the site and its place within the Museum.

There was a concern that by increasing the size of the café we would detrimentally impact the sale of goods from the shop but that has not proven to be the case, although there has not been significant growth. Creating the Beehive Café has also given us a bright and airy space for many uses. Local artists can display and sell their work in the café, and we have worked in collaboration with local creatives to deliver art and pottery classes in the evenings.

The Beehive has also been used as an event space. A planning meeting for the very popular Love Felixstowe event was held in the cafe back in the summer,

which lead to a cycle decorating workshop for local businesses wanting to get into the spirit of the Tour of Britain to and promote their shops and cafes. This was particularly pleasing as it meant the Museum was able to work alongside East Suffolk Council, Felixstowe BID and Visit Felixstowe and taking the opportunity to get involved with the TOB, even though geographically we were away from the main town and areas of activity. It brought increased footfall and helped raise awareness of the Museum.

The Beehive was also the setting for a book launch by author Julia Jones who republished "We Fought them in Gunboats", a new and unabridged version of the WW2 memoir by local war hero Robert Hitchens. Julia undertook much of her research at Felixstowe Museum and has credited us with support at subsequent literary events, including the Felixstowe Book Festival.

The Museum has also collaborated with Caring Connections, an initiative which encouraged visitors to the museum to jot down, on a postcard, their thoughts and memories of Felixstowe, and how they came to be here. There were many responses, which formed a small display at the museum, and will help inform a larger project aiming to promote wellbeing through connections with people of all ages.

Pier Projects is also collaborating with Felixstowe Museum with its View from Convalescent Hill oral history project which will run until November 2024. This Heritage Fund supported initiative aims to discover and celebrate the stories, histories and memories of Felixstowe as a Victorian Spa Town and a place for convalescence. This will also involve an artist in residence during the year ahead.

The Port of Felixstowe exhibition, which opened this year, has also been very popular. With support from local Facebook pages including the Felixstowe Dock Workers Association and Visit Felixstowe, as well as our own website and social media channels, the display has appealed to former employees and many grandchildren of former employees, as well as the public drawn to Landguard by the shipping movements. This display was born from a collaboration with the Port of Felixstowe at the 2022 Suffolk Show, and will continue for the coming year, with our thanks to them for their support.

Temporary exhibitions during 2023 included a timely and reflective commemoration of the 1953 East Coast Floods and the coronation of HM Queen Elizabeth in the same year. We are grateful for the support of Jean McPherson with the flood display and have been pleased to promote her book "1953 - Never to be forgotten." We also staged a small Bikes of Yesteryear exhibition to celebrate the Tour of Britain elite cycling race which rolled into town on September 7 with the start and finish of Stage 5 taking place on the seafront. This display combined the social history of biking along with memories of local people reflecting on their childhood 'rides'.

I think refreshing exhibitions like this, and welcoming other use of spaces such as the café, means there is always something new to discover at the Museum and that we remain connected and an integral part of the community.

Press coverage has also been pleasing this year with interest from both broadcast and print media notably Radio 4's Open Country, Suffolk Magazine, Felixstowe Radio and the local Flyer, Spotlight and Town Council magazines, and

we thank them all for the positive exposure they have given our work. Our own Facebook page now has more than 2,000 followers with our Instagram and X feeds also gaining momentum.

In the year till the end of September, Adult visitor numbers (including English Heritage) have grown from 2216 in 2022 to 2751 in 2023 an increase of 24%, but it must be remembered that we are now open for four days a week instead of three.

However, the number of children who visited has not grown by the same amount. We welcomed 516 in 2023 compared with 506 in 2022. The number of trails we sold fell from 279 last year to 264 this year but I believe it was a mistake to not have the Owl Trail running in parallel with the summer (crab) trail which has been the practice in previous years.

It was disappointing that we were not able to go ahead with our August Bank Holiday music events because of a change in the advice from English Heritage. This emphasises the need for us to negotiate a more formal agreement with EH for our occupancy of the Museum but as this also applies to the Bird Observatory, and to some extent the Fort, this is a project that will be led by the Landguard Trust.

As ever the Museum has been greatly dependent on our volunteers. We have been pleased to welcome some new faces and to have enjoyed the continued support of many long serving and hard-working colleagues. It is a delight to work at the Museum and I am humbled by and grateful for the willingness of these people to give their time so freely to support our Museum.

There are several challenges for the Museum in the year ahead, not least of which is gaining re-accreditation. I am pleased that the 80's exhibition will continue for another year as this is a real crowd pleaser and, with news that Live Aid is being made into a west end musical, we anticipate no let-up in its appeal.

It has been a great privilege for me to hold the position of Chair of the Museum during the last two years and whilst there were times on dark winter nights when I wondered what on earth I was doing here, overall, it has been an immensely enjoyable experience. I have met some great people, both as colleagues and as customers and I have learnt a lot about our town and the people who live here, which is, after all, what it is all about!

I believe that the Museum has a strong foundation for the future and a very strong Management and Leadership team so will enjoy continued success and I look forward to sharing that success but now, as a volunteer.

David Gledhill

4/10/2023

Summary Account for the year ending 31st March 2023

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