

Breckland Society's Cold War Project is good to launch!

It has just been announced that the Society has been awarded a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant of £9,410 for an exciting new heritage project, *The Cold War in the Brecks*, focusing on the dramatic story of the Cold War (1945–1990) from the perspective of local communities in the Brecks.



Being located within easy range of Continental Europe, Breckland played a crucial role in the post-Second World War standoff between the West and the Communist bloc. Many important military activities took place here, from the installation of nuclear weapon bases to the development of Top-Secret bunkers and radar and communications hubs. However, this unique chapter of local history has never been systematically researched before.

The Brecks area and its immediate surroundings included a significant number of RAF and American air bases, and as such was very much central to the deterrent nature of the Cold War. Whilst such bases were vital, they had to be protected, as did the general population, and of course there were segments of society that protested the entire concept. *The Cold War in The Brecks* project will be looking at all aspects of this critical period in European history, in which The Brecks played a central role. The project will provide a broad opportunity for people of all ages and backgrounds to become involved, either as part of the project, providing information on their experiences of this period, or by following the progress and viewing the results.

As with previous Breckland Society projects, there will be a number of ways you can get involved, including

archival research looking for images and documents about the Cold War; learning how to identify and record military structures such as bunkers, both on the ground and from aerial photographs; visiting sites that played a key role in the Cold War struggle; and interviewing Cold War participants, both military and civilian, so that an oral history archive and illustrated report can be produced at the end of the project.

The Cold War in The Brecks project will be launched imminently; details of this launch and how to get involved will be passed on to all members.

For more information on the project

please contact Ken Delve of The Breckland Society on coldwarbrecks@gmail.com

The National Lottery Heritage Fund uses money raised by the National Lottery to inspire, lead and resource the UK's heritage to create positive and lasting change for people and communities, now and in the future. www.heritagefund.org.uk.



Valiant bomber at RAF Marham; the airfield was protected by a Bloodhound missile system (background).

Half a million years of history at your fingertips

Museum 4 Watton opened less than a year ago and has already welcomed over 4,000 visitors – and what a treat was in store for them. Have you been yet?



Watton is often seen as a rather forgotten corner of Breckland but a new, and superb, museum aims to change that perception, and celebrate more than 1,000 years of the town and the incredibly rich history of the area. Watton was also the only town in Breckland not to have its own museum and in 2014 moves were made to rectify that and, importantly, collate and record the town's history before it is lost, for future generations. Making the collection and a huge number of documents available to anyone wanting to do research, or just find out more about their town and heritage, is another driving force behind this project.

In March 2018 Museum 4 Watton opened in Wayland Hall, the home of Watton Town Council, with an aim of encouraging 1,500 people to visit in the first year. Amazingly, since then it has already welcomed over 4,000 people, although strikingly few are resident in the town – a common problem.

We went to visit the museum and chat with Trustee, Chris Hutchings, who showed us around, pointing out some of the highlights and telling us a bit more about the hopes for the museum as it approaches its first anniversary. Downstairs are the archives and conservation room, where all the exhibits are catalogued and carefully recorded. Paper records are stored here, including all the Court Baron records and a number of volunteers are on hand to help anyone who wishes to access any of these precious documents. I was particularly taken with a folder full of descriptions and measured sketches made of all the churches in the surrounding Wayland villages.

Upstairs the public exhibits are housed, and what a treat! Arranged chronologically and in broad topics, they start with prehistoric man. The star of the whole show is without doubt the nationally significant hand-axe, half a million years old, found just outside the town by one of the volunteers. The displays move through the Roman period to more modern times, with particularly interesting displays from the Great Fire of Watton in 1674, and the famous *Babes in the Wood* story. The final main displays celebrate the fascinating military connections at Watton and have bearing on the Cold War project we are about to launch.

There's plenty to keep children amused as well, especially a chance to find a mouse in each of the display cabinets – some are much easier to spot than others! The museum is still developing and receiving more exhibits daily. It is a fabulous resource and a visit is highly recommended.

DID YOU KNOW?

The town's name comes from Wat – a local name for a hare and Ton – a term used for a barrel during the town's brewing history. Look out for hares jumping barrels on the town's name signs and elsewhere!

Above Left to Right: One of the WW2 display cabinets; a town building stone salvaged and marked by the Great Fire; the documents room downstairs with a volunteer hard at work cataloguing; a display exploring the Babes in the Woods story, set in Wayland Wood; a cast of a Roman era skeleton recently unearthed during town developments; the 500,000-year-old flint hand axe, one of the oldest in the country.

WONDERFUL WINTER VISITORS

Despite the vagaries of the British winter weather, it is actually a great time to get out and do some wildlife watching. Breckland is particularly well-known for Great Grey Shrikes, a stunning and obvious bird that tends to sit out in the open on the tops of shrubs and hedges.

Shrikes are a group of predatory songbirds, whose lifestyle and diet make them appear at times more like miniature birds of prey. Some 31 species are found around the world, with most in Eurasia and Africa, with two species (one of which is the widely distributed Great Grey Shrike) also found in North America. Five species breed in Europe (Great Grey, Lesser Grey, Woodchat, Masked and Red-backed Shrike) of which only the Red-backed Shrike has regularly bred in Britain - with its last English stronghold being at St Helen's picnic site at Santon Downham!

The common English name 'shrike' is from Old English *scrīc*, alluding to the shrike's shriek-like call but the family name is more revealing. *Lanius*, is derived from the Latin word for butcher, and shrikes are also known as butcherbirds because of their feeding habits. They catch insects and small vertebrates and impale their bodies on thorns. This helps them to tear the flesh into smaller, more conveniently sized fragments, and serves as a cache so that the shrike can return to the uneaten portions at a later time.

Great Grey Shrikes, winter visitors from their Scandinavian breeding stronghold, take a wide range of prey but are particularly good hunters of rodents – and have been known to take mammals up to the size of a Stoat!



Photo: James Parry

SECRETARY TO THE SOCIETY

Do you fancy: Attending committee meetings, preparing the agenda for meetings and writing the minutes, greeting new members by letter/email, fielding members' queries and other correspondence, supporting the Treasurer in maintaining the membership list: membership queries to be directed to the Treasurer, who will keep the membership list and deal with overdue subs.

The Secretary will provide the event organiser with a list of attendees and ensure the website is updated with information about events, notify members and pass any event publicity to the local press.

If you are interested in joining us and would like to know more about what's involved, then please contact James on info@brecsoc.org.uk

What's On

See www.brecsoc.org.uk/news-and-events

Sat/Sun March 23 or 24, 12.00 noon

Adders and Other Wildlife at Cavenham Heath

(weather dependent- decision will be made a few days before)

If you wish to join us, please email secretary@brecsoc.org.uk to reserve a place – if you are only available on one of the days, please state this on your email. **FREE.** *Places will be strictly limited. Joining instructions will be sent out a week before the event.*

Friday April 26, 7 – 9pm

Private Visit to Brandon Heritage Centre, George Street, Brandon.

Our April event will be a private visit to the recently re-opened Heritage Centre in Brandon, which tells the story of the development of Brandon from the Stone Age to the present day.

Members £7.00, non-members £10.00.

Includes a glass of wine.

Wed May 15 (early evening, info on booking).

A private evening visit to the Shadwell Stud Thetford.

We will be given a guided tour of the equine facilities, including meeting some of the stallions, and will also see some of the historic buildings and heritage features on the wider estate. **Members-only** with priority given to those who were not able to join the previous visit in May 2016). **£8.00**

Book in advance by contacting secretary@brecsoc.org.uk by 30 April at the latest.

SOCIETY BAT PROJECT WINS AWARD

The Society's pioneering survey into the bats of the Brecks has picked up a prestigious award from the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

The CPRE Norfolk Awards scheme was launched in 1979 to recognise significant achievements in buildings and landscape and is one of the longest running awards schemes in the county. At the awards evening held in The Hostry at Norwich Cathedral last November, the Society won a Successful Campaign Award for our Breckland Bat Project.

The project was run in association with the Norfolk Bat Survey over five recording seasons from 2013–17. The Society was already aware of the potential importance of the Brecks for bats, based on the limited fieldwork carried out by specialist bat groups, but we wanted to undertake a more comprehensive and participatory survey of these little-known and often misunderstood mammals.

We acquired our own bat recording kit and publicised the project as widely as possible before each recording season. No specialist knowledge was required on the part of potential participants who, with the help of Norfolk Bat Survey personnel, were trained so they could use the bat kit themselves at sites of their choice across the area. Using an online portal, participants could select 1-km squares in which to record. They were encouraged to run the kit on 1–3 nights in each square, subsequently sending the kit memory card to the Norfolk Bat Survey Team at the British Trust for Ornithology in Thetford for the downloading of data and its interpretation. Each participant was then sent feedback for their squares, with details of how many bat 'passes' had been recorded and assigning these to individual species where possible.

The results of the project included:

- 249 x 1-km squares were surveyed for bats in one or more years

- 831 complete nights of bat recording were logged, at 695 different recording locations
- 85 volunteers took part, many of them surveying more than one square
- A total of 200,730 recordings were assigned to individual species
- A total of 11 bat species were recorded, with especially notable concentrations of Leisler's Bat, Barbastelle, Serotine, Daubenton's Bat, Brown long-eared Bat, Natterer's Bat and Soprano Pipistrelle.

The project has transformed understanding of bat distribution and presence in the Brecks and raised levels of public awareness of bats and their conservation needs. It has also demonstrated how 'citizen science' can support professional ecologists and land managers. There has been an important community legacy, with some volunteers continuing to record in future seasons and their data contributing to the ongoing wider Norfolk Bat Survey. Full results of the project were published in the *Journal of Breckland Studies* Volume 2 (September 2018).



“The Most Secret Place on Earth”

On November 16 2018, local author Roger Pugh told us the extraordinary tale of how, in 1916, the War Department needed an out-of-the-way location to create a huge but secret area where the new (and, they hoped, war-winning) weapon – the tank – could be tested, crews trained, and tactics developed and trialled. They approached Lord Iveagh who quickly agreed to lease a large area of the Elveden Estate to the government.

An accurate replica of part of the Western Front trench system was constructed, covering several square miles, using over a million sandbags, a branch railway line was built to bring in the still-secret tanks under cover of darkness, and the whole site was protected by two cordons and 12,000 troops! But today only the faintest traces of this huge venture remain in the Breckland landscape. In just 100 years, it has vanished under the King's Forest and Berner's Heath.

Roger's excellent book of the same name can be purchased online and from many local bookshops and museums.