Newsletter 74 December 2024

RECENT EVENTS

Lynford Chapel and Arboretum
Fungus Foray at Didlington
Christmas Social at West Stow

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

Centenary Celebrations at the Ancient House Museum
A Decoy Pond at Didlington Hall

EVENTS

Monday January 6th. 2pm at Thetford Guildhall. Launch event for the new Breckland Society publication 'Industrious Rivers'. Copies of this free book will be available at this event.

Friday February 28th. 7pm at Mundford Village Hall. 'Looking for the Goshawk'. A talk by Conor Mark Jameson.

Further details of these events can be found on the Breckland Society website. Members will also receive an occasional message by email to inform them of forthcoming events for the year. They will also be notified by email when tickets for Society events are available on the Eventbrite website.

THE BRECKLAND SOCIETY AND THE BRECKS FEN EDGE AND RIVERS PARTNERSHIP (BFER)

This scheme will conclude with an End of Scheme conference in Thetford Carnegie Rooms and Guildhall on Thursday January 30th 9.30am to 4pm.

There will be a programme of talks and displays by the many groups who have contributed and benefitted from the BFER scheme since 2020.

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

Visit to Lynford Chapel of Ease and the Grounds of Lynford Hall on Friday September 27th

On Friday 27th September, a group of 15 Breckland Society members met at Shepherds Baa Cafe, Lynford for a walk through the Arboretum into the forest to see The Church of Our Lady of Consolation and St Stephen. During the walk, James Parry gave an entertaining insight into Stephens and Yolande Lyne-Stephens and the history of their fortune. On arrival at the church - which is kept locked but had been opened for our visit - Simon Rope gave a tour of the impressive architectural features both outside and in. Built in 1878 and rare in Norfolk for not being mediaeval, the highlights include the stained glass windows by Mayer & Co, an altar and reredos (see picture) after Pugin and a barrel vaulted ceiling conveying Noah's ark. The buttresses on the exterior contain some 11th century panels. We are grateful to the Norfolk Churches Trust which cares for the chapel, for allowing our visit.



Photograph by Carol Palfreyman

The return walk took a detour via the site of the original Lynford Hall, where Carol Palfreyman showed the group the remains of its enormous cellars and the ice house. The visit ended with lunch back at Shepherds Baa Cafe.

Simon Rope

The Christmas Social at West Stow Hall on Friday December 6th

On the evening of 6th December we made our way through the spectacular two-storey gatehouse of West Stow Hall, along the atmospheric open arched colonnade and into the warm interior of the main part of the house. We were greeted by our hosts, Andy and Eileen Gilbert, and after a glass of fizz, Andy gave us a brief introduction to the Hall's history, based on extensive research he has carried out since the Gilberts bought it in 2009. An earlier moated house was present on the site as early as the 13th century, replaced by the current red brick Tudor house and the turreted gatehouse from about 1520. The two-storey colonnade linking them is thought to have been added in the 1580s. West Stow Hall is Grade I listed.



Andy explained that the Hall was probably built by Sir John Croft, who initially leased the Manor of West Stow from Bury St Edmunds Abbey, and then purchased it after the Abbey's dissolution. Sir John was Master of Horse to Mary Tudor, the sister of Henry VIII and wife of Henry XII of France. Her regnal coat of Arms is on a terracotta plaque on the front of the gatehouse.

The Hall remained in the ownership of the Croft family until 1670, when it passed to a member of the Proger family, who were royal servants. Subsequent owners included the Marquis of Cornwallis and the Rev Edward Benyon, Rector of Culford, who filled in the moat to deal with subsidence and made many alterations during the 19th century. It was then bought by Earl Cadogan, who owned the Culford estate at the time. There have been four other owners since 1937.

After Andy's introduction we enjoyed socialising, canapés and drinks in between taking tours of the rest of the house with Andy and Eileen. We learned, amongst other things, that the Hall has very large timber frames joined by iron ties, with the front downstairs rooms particularly heavily timbered. Some of the beams have extremely interesting decorative carvings and there are many 'apotropaic' burn marks, made deliberately to ward off evil spirits. The house was built with a remarkable number of voids, many of which still exist. In the room now used as the lounge there is stonework from the Abbey of St. Edmund and an enormous inglenook, said to be the second largest in the whole of Suffolk. The structure of the house has been changed so many times and is now so complex that a fieldwork visit to it forms part of the curriculum for students from Cambridge University studying for a Masters in Built Environment.



Climbing to the first floor, we walked through the enclosed upper storey of the colonnade, panelled with timber from various era, and into a small upstairs room at the front of the gatehouse, which has turrets in each corner. Eileen explained that turrets had become fashionable soon after Hampton Court Palace was built. This room contains remarkable wall paintings of two related scenes, and above both is a dolphin scroll decorative panel.



The first part of the wall painting fills the whole height of the room and depicts the 'good things of life' at West Stow, with dogs, a pheasant, a bird that may be peacock, a bear, perhaps about to be baited, and in the centre a man with a staff from which hangs an enormous pink rabbit or hare, which is much larger than him!

The second scene is a copy of one of more European woodcuts of the four sexual ages of man: the first is a man holding a goshawk, with ''Thus I do all the day'' written above; the second shows a man grasping a woman "Thus I do while I may"; the third is an older man pointing at the couple and saying "Thus I did when I might" and the last an old man with a walking stick, looking rueful, with the words "Good Lord will this world last ever". The painting are thought to date from around 1575. There are also some very notable decorative features on the outside of the Hall, which we obviously couldn't see in the dark. Occasional afternoon tours of West Stow Hall can be arranged through the Historic House Association that some members now intending to attend. Click here for information:

https://www.historichouses.org/house/west-stow-hall/

We are extremely grateful to Andy and Eileen for their warm hosting of our Social, and for everything they have done to research the history of West Stow Hall and conserve it for future generations to enjoy.

Pat Reynolds

Photographs by Alan Clarke

Fungus Foray at Didlington on Sunday October 13th

Following on from the successful 2023 fungus foray held at Foulden, on the October 14th 2024 a group of members embarked on a fungus foray at Didlington, courtesy of our host Fiona Dickson, herself a fungi enthusiast. Our group was led by Geoffrey Kibby, one of the country's foremost experts on the field identification of fungi, and we had a fascinating two-hour foray as Geoffrey identified and told us about all the fungi we saw, both large and small. None of us will be consuming Death Caps by mistake, that's for sure! The foray ended with Fiona serving us her homemade mead.

Tony Leach, county recorder for Norfolk, was due to lead the foray, but was unable to do so, but both he and Geoffrey Kibby are keen to do more forays because of the enthusiasm and engagement of the members. Hopefully we can make this an annual event.

Carol Palfreyman
Photographs by Christine Lang



Death Cap *Amanita phalloides*



Bircham Polymore *Piptoporus betulinus*



Artist's Bracket *Ganoderma applanatum*



King Alfred's Cakes *Daldinia concentrica*

The Ancient House Museum, Thetford. A new exhibition. Saturday 23 November 2024 –29 November 2025

A new exhibition opened on Saturday 23 November to celebrate Ancient House Museum's fascinating and eclectic collection – from a 100,000-year-old hand axe to a 1990s Skid Lid bike helmet, and anything and everything in between!

The History of Ancient House in 100 Objects exhibition kicks off a year of celebrations as the museum marks the centenary of its opening on 11th December 1924. The exhibition and the centenary celebrations are supported by National Lottery players through The National Lottery Heritage Fund, Norfolk County Council, Breckland Council, Arts Council England supported by the UK Government, Thetford Town Council and Friends of Ancient House Museum.

To commemorate this important milestone, curators at the museum have worked with local school and community groups, including The Breckland Society, to create the exhibition which focuses on the importance of the museum's ever-evolving collection of more than 7,000 objects.



Oliver Bone and Melissa Hawker join volunteers to recreate the picture taken at the opening of the Museum in 1924

Each group chose ten items which came into the museum collection during each decade the museum has been open, from the 1920s to the 2020s. Delving into the museum archives, the community curators researched hundreds of objects to come up with their final shortlists to go on display.

The resulting displays contain a huge range of objects from the ancient to the modern, from the humble to the elaborate, and from the famous to the obscure. What unites them is they are all, in their own way, 'treasure'.

Examples include the death mask of Thomas Paine – possibly Thetford's most famous son – appearing alongside a humble 16th century clay cooking pot from a chalk mine on Station Road. A famous hoard of Roman silver coins discovered by a detectorist from Thetford bypass excavations in 1989 is complemented by a hand-made nail which caught the attention of one community curator because it's bent and had a 'hard life'.



The choice of exhibits for each decade are explained on a paddle.

The reasons for choosing each object, included in the displays, show the many different ways we connect with material history as Oliver Bone, long-standing Curator of Ancient House Museum, explains:

"It's been fascinating and instructive to hear why certain objects have appealed. One young person from the museum's History Club chose a flint from the prehistoric site of Grimes Graves, describing it as being 'sharp like a porcupine as dark as a storm cloud'.

"Others have been chosen because they've triggered personal memories for community members – an inkwell of being an ink monitor at school or a rusty pen knife bringing back happy times helping Grandad pick runner beans. While for some it's the questions the object raises which intrigue – like the key to a house that no longer exists. Their thoughtful responses remind us that objects from the past don't necessarily have to be valuable to be of value."

Items like wig curlers, lace bobbins and dress pins and tools like an ancient quern stone or postal scales reveal details of people's everyday

personal and working lives, while the public life of the town is revealed in objects such as a poster for Town Hall entertainments (featuring a ‘laughing horse’ and ‘The Wonderful Whistler’) or a Coronation Medal of Edward VII.

The range of objects on display provides a snapshot of how the museum’s collections have developed over the past hundred years, whether through the generous efforts of local donors like George Wild Staniforth, purchases supported by the Museum Friends and others, or in more modern times, through fundraising to acquire important items.



Oliver Bone shows the Breckland Society exhibit to some visitors. If you want to see what was in the case, why not visit the museum?

The history of the collections is also a history of the museum’s development, a story the exhibition also tells alongside the displays of objects – from its origins as a gift to the town from Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, its expansion through the dedication of curators and volunteers, to the major redevelopment in 2004-2006 and the vibrant community museum Ancient House is today.

A History of Ancient House in 100 Objects is open until November 29th 2025 and is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the museum’s collections and history as we look forward to the next hundred years and imagine what might enter the collections in the future.

Melissa Hawker
Photographs courtesy of Norfolk Museums Service.



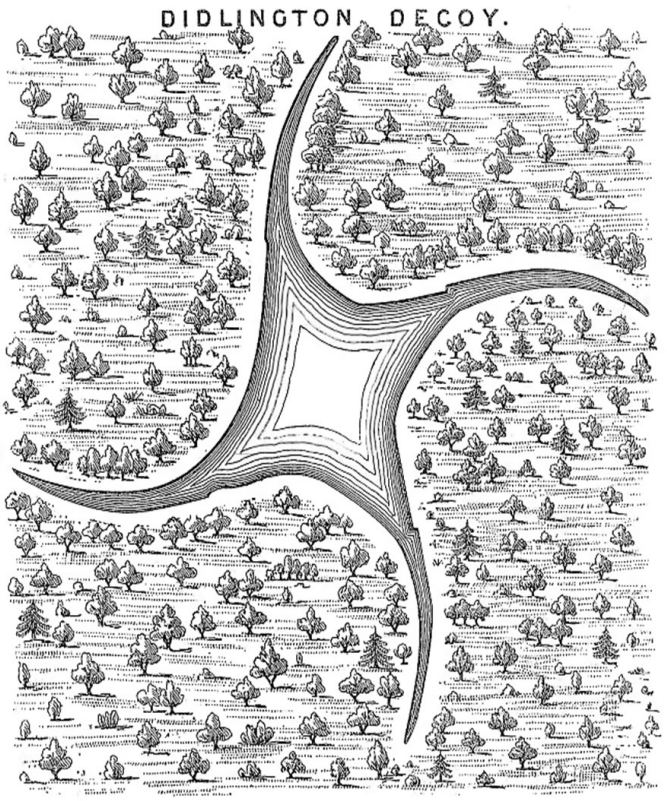
The Ancient House. An early document refers to its origin in the reign of Henry IV (1461-83).

It retains many original features inside and a physic garden to the rear.

The remains of a Duck Decoy in the grounds of Didlington Hall. A report of a field expedition by Breckland Society members Andy Carter and Imogen Radford.

A decoy is a pond with radiating, curved arms used for capturing ducks and other waterfowl to eat without damaging them with gunshot. The arm in use is covered with netting supported by hoops above the water, and the ducks are lured into the arm, known as a pipe, by a dog which shows itself behind fences at various points along the arm, by their natural curiosity.

The decoy pond at Didlington remains in some form amongst the undergrowth, fallen branches, trees and standing woodland. It is still within a privately owned estate. Our walk around the decoy was in a clockwise direction starting from the north side of the western arm. We had hoped to walk close to each arm but some areas were inaccessible, principally due to water and wet and boggy ground.



The area of the decoy within the surrounding woodland is very damp, there is much bare soil with little or no ground vegetation, stripped and trampled by deer and other wildlife. There is much water, many puddles and many drains as well as the decoy pond and its arms. Without maps and some form of reliable GPS device it was very difficult at first to determine what and where are the pond and the arms.

Extract from Payne-Gallwey, 'The Book of Duck Decoys', 1886,.

"Didlington, about 9 miles NW. of the last-mentioned Decoy, is another, which was constructed by the Rev. J. Fountaine in 1865 for its present owner, Mr. W. Tyssen-Amherst, M.P., of Didlington Park. It is situated in a wood of 10 acres, about 500 yards from the mansion. It is just an acre in extent, and has four pipes. The fowl taken are chiefly Duck and Teal, with a few Wigeon ; the average number caught annually being 500. In one season 1,000 were caught, and many more than are now taken might be easily captured were it not that the Decoy is only worked for pleasure and sport, and not for profit.

"In the shooting season the wood in which the Decoy is situated is usually shot once or twice. On one of these occasions when the Author was present, after first decoying some Ducks, 200 to 300 Pheasants were killed in the covert surrounding the Decoy, yet two days afterwards there were as many Ducks as before in the Decoy ; showing that shooting round a Decoy occasionally will not damage it.

"An amusing incident occurred the first time this Decoy was worked. Mr. Fountaine, who constructed it, was anxious that its reputation should be at once established by making a successful catch in it the first time it was tried. In the presence of the seventh Duke of Leeds, he proceeded to work the Decoy. In one pipe were some eighty Duck he had lured well inside ; all were driven up the pipe successfully, but, alas ! the tunnel net had been omitted at the pipe's end, and every bird dashed through and away to freedom. Quoth the Duke, "Well done, Mr. Fountaine ! now, can you put them through again, may I ask ? "

"The Duke was particularly interested in Decoys, Mr. Fountaine having at that date just assisted in planning one for him at Hornby Castle ; so that this accident, though amusing to him, was a great disappointment to Mr. Fountaine.

"The Decoy is maintained in superb order by Mr. Tyssen-Amherst, M.P., who takes no little pride in its possession —both as an object of curiosity as well as an ornamental feature in connection with his fine sporting estate of Didlington — an estate which, I may safely say, is celebrated, both for the immense number of game it shelters as well as for the great variety of wildfowl its fens and rivers afford. There is at Didlington, in the immediate vicinity both of the Hall and the Decoy, a fine mere of 60 acres — a magnificent harbour, to attract wildfowl to the neighbourhood — and from which it is but a short flight for them into the Decoy hard by. One of the Decoy pipes is actually in view of the windows of the mansion, and though the Decoy is within 300 to 400 paces of a school, gas-works, and a large farm and garden, still its success is so well ensured that 1,000 Ducks may often be seen resting in its seclusion."

The Decoy Today



The remains of the tapering hoops which trapped the ducks.



This is at the end of an arm, the netting over the hoops have reduced at this point and netting replaced with wire netting, close to the point where the ducks would be trapped and retrieved.

Proposals For Projects To Receive A Breckland Society Grant. The deadline deadline for suggestions from members has been extended to February 28th 2025.

Please read the following and put your thinking caps on!

At this year's Annual General Meeting, members agreed that the Society's current financial reserves are such that the making of two grants of up to £1,500 each over the next one or two financial years (i.e. up to £3,000 in total) is appropriate.

Grants will be considered for projects or initiatives that help support and promote Breckland's heritage, either directly through preservation or conservation, or by helping to inform local residents and/or visitors of its value. To qualify, any project must have a tangible output and a lasting benefit, and not be financially viable without the Society's contribution.

It was agreed that the Society will seek to operate its grant-making scheme by collaborating with appropriate partners, such as the History Department at UEA, Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the British Trust for Ornithology. They will be invited to recommend projects and/or individuals (e.g. students working on a particular Brecks-related project or area of study) that might be worthy of the Society's support. This arrangement would also raise the possibility of working together on a match-funding basis to help bring worthy projects to fruition, provided that the grant from the Breckland Society makes a significant and identifiable contribution to the project/individual supported.

The AGM also agreed that Society members should be given the opportunity to nominate specific projects for consideration for a grant. The same general criteria outlined above will apply, and the member concerned must have no financial interest in the project proposed.

If you would like to suggest a project that you think would merit a grant of up to £1500, please send us the name of the project, along with a short description (no more than 150 words) of what the project involves and how it would meet the defined criteria above.

The deadline for suggestions is now 28 February 2025 and the Society's committee intends to take a decision on which project(s) will be supported in the spring. The committee will draw on specialist expertise to assess proposals as appropriate.

Please email your suggestions to secretary.brecsoc@gmail.com