Newsletter 77 February 2026

RECENT EVENTS

A Fungus Foray on the Shadwell Estate

A Christmas Concert at Oxborough

OTHER ITEMS OF INTEREST

An Iron Age War Trumpet uncovered in the Brecks

Merton Village: Our venue for the AGM

Norfolk Churches Trust Skills and Maintenance Day in some Breckland Churches

FUTURE EVENTS

Friday March 13th 10.30am
Guided walk on Cavenham Heath

Wednesday April 22nd 9.30am
Nightingale Walk on Maidscross Hill at Lakenheath

Thursday June 18th 6pm
AGM and history talk at Merton Church

Further details of these events can be found on the Breckland Society website.

THE BRECKS LANDSCAPE PARTNERSHIP

The Landscape Partnership is the successor to the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Partnership, a collaboration of local organisations, land managers, authorities, communities and volunteers all working together to care for, protect and celebrate the unique character of the Brecks.
To find out more about this new venture and download the monthly newsletter, go to https://brecks.org/about/

LIVING AND BELIEVING IN THE BRECKS

Fungus Foray on the Shadwell Estate, 12 October 2025

We met our leaders, Tony Leech, the County Fungus Recorder for Norfolk, and Geoffrey Kibbey, one of England's leading mycologists, on a misty Sunday morning for the Society's third annual Fungus Foray. Courtesy of the Shadwell Estate, our route took us along a broad expanse of grassland that had been undisturbed for centuries, bounded by mature broadleaf woodland containing many enormous trees, included a few magnificent dead oaks. The Estate owners are currently restoring the park around the Grade 1 listed Shadwell Court to its former glory, so an understorey of rhododendron has been removed, leaving some areas of relatively freshly disturbed ground.



Tony Leech examines a fungus found by one of our members. (Imogen Radford)

We learned that although fungi don't need light to photosynthesise, because they receive their nutrients from decaying organic material, they will not grow in areas where there is no light, to ensure that their fruiting bodies emerge in position to disperse their spores. Tony explained that it is safe to pick up fungi with our hands – our job was to find specimens for Tony and Geoffrey to identify and record. We would be carrying out an important piece of 'citizen science' because our finds would be the first ever records from Shadwell.

During the morning, we found 53 species. These ranged from the well-known such as the iconic red and white spotted Fly Agaric (*Amanita muscaria*) and the Common Puffball *(Lycoperdon perlatum)* - to those which Geoffrey and Tony identified after some debate, and a few where only the genus could be identified in the field and microscopic examination was needed to confirm the species. We found one extremely rare fungus – *Russula clavipes,* which is a Brittlegill with a large yellow green cap and white gills. It was the first record for Norfolk and only about the 20th nationally and is so rare that it doesn't have a common name. Some of the common names of our finds were particularly charming or quaint: Scurfy Twiglet (*Tubaria furfuracea)*, a small pale brown fungus; the red capped Redlead Roundhead (*Leratiomyces ceres*) and Hairy Curtain Crust (*Stereum hirsutum*) which forms overlapping yellow-orange layers on wood. Hoof Fungus (*Fomes fomentarius*) is a dark grey bracket fungus and can be aged by counting its rings. The common bracket Birch Polypore (*Piptoporous betulinus*) is also known as the Razorstrop Fungus. For the full list of the species we found, with brief descriptions, click **here**.



Artists Bracket Fungus on a fallen tree. (Carol Palfreyman)

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Many fungi are strongly associated with particular trees, which provides an important guide to identification. Some species are generalists though – such as the fairly ubiquitous Honey Fungus (*Armillaria mellea*) and the Sulphur Tuft (*Hypoloma fasiculare*), which occur on both coniferous and deciduous decaying wood. Sulphur Tuft is one of a few bioluminescent fungi – when Geoffrey shone UV light onto a specimen the stem glowed yellowy green and the cap purple. The luminescence is thought to attract insects, which aids spore distribution.

Tony gave us some helpful advice for our own identification attempts: remember that the illustrations or photographs in field guides show perfect specimens, whereas the fungi that you will find rarely will be – they may be smaller or larger, affected by their age and may be distorted by their immediate environment.



Hairy Curtain Crust (Carol Palfreyman)

Also remember that fungi are hard to identify, so don't try to identify everything that you see.

We had a most interesting, enjoyable and informative morning and would like to extend warm thanks to Tony and Geoffrey for leading us once again. We are very grateful to committee member Carol Palfreyman and the Estate Manager Sarah Exton for allowing us to visit Shadwell and joining us on the excursion.

Pat Reynolds

The Norfolk Churches Trust Heritage Skills and Maintenance Day Saturday April 18th 10am – 2.30pm.

As part of its 50th Birthday Celebrations the Trust is holding a 'hands on' celebration of traditional skills, conservation and care of Norfolk Churches. It will be a day to explore the skills, stories and practical work that keep the churches standing strong. Experts will be on hand with demonstrations, talks and plenty of opportunities for you to try these out. This is a free day.

Our area has been chosen to hold these events, for example restoration of a 17th century bell at Didlington and stained glass repairs and conservation at Great Cressingham. There will be things to see and hear about in other churches as well including Gooderstone, Oxborough, Little Cressingham, Foulden, and Hilborough. At each church there will be childrens' activities and a representative of the Trust will be on hand to share the history of the building and explain the Trust's work.

At a central hub in Great Cressingham Village Hall there will be information on funding, faculties and a new Heritage Skills Scholarship Scheme as well as afternoon tea, prize giving and a final opportunity to meet the craftspeople taking part on the day.

There is plenty of information on the Trust's website https://norfolkchurchestrust.org.uk/events/heritage-skills-and-maintenance-day/ with a variety of experts attending the churches including bell specialist Neil Thomas, textile conservation expert Maria Jordan, John Hogg of R & J Hogg builders and architect Ruth Blackman.

Christmas Concert with The Guildhall Singers, 14 December 2025

Fifty members and guests filled the church of St John the Evangelist at Oxborough for a concert by The Guildhall Singers shortly before Christmas. Based in Kings Lynn, the choir has made a name for itself as a leading vocal ensemble showcasing a repertoire ranging from the Renaissance to modern classics. Music director Andrés Hernández-Salazar conducted the choir in a programme that included works by Palestrina, Praetorius and Max Reger, as well as traditional carols by John Rutter, Charles Wood and others. The concert was preceded by an introduction to the Grade I-listed church and its history by Society member and Oxborough resident Barbara Pritchard, and followed by plentiful champagne, canapés and mince pies in the magnificent setting of the adjoining Bedingfeld Chapel, which boasts two of the finest early 16th century terracotta tomb monuments in Britain. It was a most enjoyable evening and a privilege to enjoy time in one of the most beautiful churches in the Brecks.
James Parry



The choir and conductor (Alan Clarke)



Bar Pritchard recounts some of the history of Oxborough Church (Alan Clarke)



Champagne and canapes after the concert in a chilly but stunning Bedingfeld Chapel

(James Parry)



The choir (James Parry)

Iron Age War Trumpet Uncovered in The Brecks

The sensational discovery in Breckland of a buried hoard of precious objects dating back to the Iron Age has raised the intriguing prospect of a new link with Boudica and the Iceni tribe. Unearthed last summer as part of routine archaeological work being carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeology (PCA) on a new housing project a few miles from Thetford, the recent announcement of the find – believed to date back to the first century CE – has highlighted the importance of The Brecks for Iron Age history and heritage. The hoard contains a range of high-status objects including five shield bosses, a sheet bronze boar's head from a military standard and one of the finest examples yet discovered anywhere in the world of a carnyx, a type of musical instrument often known as a 'war trumpet' and carried by Iron Age warriors into battle. Although the precise location of the find has not been disclosed, it lies within the known territory of the Iceni, who famously took on the might of the Roman Empire under their queen, Boudica. Around 60–61 CE they sacked the important Roman settlement of Camulodunum (present-day Colchester) and proceeded to attack and burn Londinium (London) before eventually being overwhelmed and defeated by the Roman counterattack.



The hoard gradually being revealed during micro-excavation at the Norfolk Museum Service conservation laboratory.
(Image copyright Norfolk Museums Service)


With the shield bosses and boar standard excavated from the block, the carnyx is revealed. It is incredibly fragile, requiring conservation treatment before it can be removed from the block. (Image copyright Norfolk Museums Service)

The precise history of the Iceni in The Brecks remains elusive, but these new finds add to the growing bank of knowledge about their presence in the area. Particularly tantalising is the discovery of an almost complete carnyx. These bronze trumpet-type instruments are known from across the ancient Celtic world and took the form of a long pipe up to six feet long, held vertically and with the upper end turned horizontally and flared out into a bell shape, often fashioned in the shape of a wild animal's head with an open mouth through which the sound blasted.

Carnyces played an important role on the battlefield, where their eerie and powerful effect was used to both galvanise warriors and intimidate the enemy. The Greek historian Polybius (206–126 BC), recounted their impact in battle: "There were countless trumpeters and horn blowers and since the whole army was shouting its war cries at the same time there was such a confused sound that the noise seemed to come not only from the trumpeters and the soldiers but also from the countryside which was joining in the echo". The use by Celtic tribes of the carnyx as a psychological weapon of war was also remarked upon by the first-century BC historian Diodorus Siculus, who wrote: "Their trumpets are

also of a peculiar and barbaric kind which produce a harsh, reverberating sound suitable to the confusion of battle."

The following Q and A with Tom Lucking, PCA's metal specialist, reveal more about the discoveries and their wider implications:

What are the possible explanations for the carnyx, boar battle standard and shield bosses being grouped together?

This will inevitably be an ongoing debate. The hoard is a very structured and deliberate deposition, featuring rare and prestigious objects of a ceremonial/martial nature that have been specifically chosen for inclusion and carefully placed and arranged in a pit. It is possible that the hoard represents items captured on the battlefield, but it could equally be the result of the ceremonial 'killing' and dismantling of objects after a defeat, when whatever powers they were meant to have did not work. It could also be part of a longer-term ceremonial practice that, despite the inclusion of martial equipment, would not necessarily have involved warfare to trigger the burying of the hoard. There are comparisons for these kinds of ceremonial/martial equipment hoards on the continent, at places such as Tintignac in France, but nothing of this nature has been found previously in Britain.



The boar's head would have been mounted on a pole and held aloft in battle like a flag. (Image copyright Norfolk Museums Service)

How many carnyces are in the hoard?

We think we have almost all of one carnyx (a small section may be missing), and a fragment of at least a second. So, we have the head and bell, lengths of tubing with a mouthpiece attached at the end, and then a second short length of tubing with another mouthpiece attached.

Can we assume that these objects were linked to the Iceni?

Insofar as the hoard was found within the territory of the Iceni, it is a reasonable assumption that it was buried by them. The extent to which the objects in the hoard were used by the Iceni is harder to say at this stage. They may have been part of the high-end ceremonial/martial equipment of the Iceni, but could equally have been captured by them, or indeed brought back from the continent during the Gallic Wars in the same way that coins of the Ambiani [an Iron Age tribe inhabiting modern-day Picardy in France] appear in Britain at that time. It is also important to note that we do not yet have precise dating on these objects. It is possible that some (or all) of them were already old and had been curated for a long period before burial.

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What does the hoard say about the significance of The Brecks as a focus for Iron Age research and archaeology?

This discovery further cements the importance of western Norfolk as a broad zone containing significant Iron Age sites in a density not found elsewhere in East Anglia. The Brecks sits within this zone and has some important sites and monuments from the period, so any study of Iron Age East Anglia has to look at The Brecks as an important landscape within this wider area of interest.

End note: PCA is working with Historic England, Norfolk Museums Service and the National Museum of Scotland to coordinate research and the conservation of the objects. Where they will be housed long-term is yet to be determined. Meanwhile, the Society hopes to invite a representative from PCA to give a lecture to members later this year on the hoard and its context in the wider Iron Age history of The Brecks.

James Parry



Image 4. Repoussé decoration on the Gundestrup Cauldron, discovered in 1891 in Denmark and dated to 150 BCE–1 CE, shows how the carnyx was played. Image from wikicommons/bloodofox

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Merton: The venue for our Annual General Meeting on June 18th 2025

Many of the dwellings in the village were originally the cottages of labourers, gardeners or gamekeepers of the Merton Estate. The estate was largely on poor Breckland soils and was an important area for game shooting, hosting such guests as the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, and the Maharajah Duleep Singh. In 1942 18,000 acres of land between Thetford and Watton, much of which was Merton estate land, was requisitioned by the War Department for troop training. In June about 800 people were evacuated from their homes and livelihoods, some allowed only to return briefly to gather the harvest.

From the church, where we shall be holding the AGM, the Hall can be viewed across the lake. It is the home of the present Lord Walsingham. The Jacobean Hall is gone except for a gatehouse. In 1956 the parts which did not succumb to a fire were demolished, and what remains today is the early Victorian east wing.

Julia Grover