**The History of Friends of Colchester Museums and Art Galleries**

**from 1999 to 2024**

by Peter Evans

In 1999, when the Friends of Museums celebrated fifty years since its foundation, the Chair was Andrew Phillips, Honorary Secretary Patrick Denney and Barbara Napper the Hon. Treasurer, who was retiring after 25 years service (I replaced her) with - amongst the long serving committee members - Andrew Millar and Leonard Drinkell, a founding member.

Membership was 178 single members and 175 couples and our balance at the bank was £11,052. The lecture series for 1999 included talks from Phillip Crummy, Rosalind Niblett (his predecessor at the Colchester Archaeological Trust), Peter Berridge, Museum Manager, David Clarke, former Curator at the Museum, Dave Stenning, Historic Building specialist at Essex County Council and Professor Geoffrey Martin.

The Friends of Museums had changed by this time from the original format of meals and meetings – all seemingly very formal – to a more relaxed style of 12 lectures, held in the Charles Gray Room in the Castle Museum, and two summer excursions. There were occasional special evenings in the Castle as well, celebrating new exhibitions.

The executive committee usually met three times a year, with informal meeting for mailings. Members received two newsletters a year: in January including information about talks and trips for the coming year and renewal information and in August featuring the annual accounts for the previous year. In March, there was a mailing featuring the AGM papers.

The talks were very popular and numbers attending were increasing. With their connections, Andrew and Patrick were able to find excellent speakers, usually on local history subjects, who had often contacted them for help and advice. Museum Staff often offered talks and Andrew and Patrick were joined by some other regulars. Admission was £1 for members and £2 for non-members. Soon, talks were not illustrated by slides but by PowerPoint and eventually heavy boxes of fragile slides were replaced a memory stick.

As attendance and membership grew, it was possible to help the Museum more, usually by purchasing items for the collections but also by supporting exhibitions and, on one occasion, buying a computer. There was always a good relationship with the Museum team, by this time including Peter Berridge, the manager, Tom Hodgson and Philip Wise. There were also good relations with Philip Crummy at the Colchester Archaeological Trust.

Andrew and Patrick were heavily involved with Colchester Recalled, the Oral History group, and there were links to other local groups.

I joined the Friends in 1992 when I read of the purchase a Georgian painting of the Colchester Northgate, which had been discovered in Exeter. This is the only view of a town gate that we know of. I joined the committee in the late 1990's, originally as Auditor. I succeeded Barbara Napper as Hon. Treasurer in 2000, Barbara being made a Vice-president. Soon after, I made our first claim under deeds of covenant, the scheme that predated Gift Aid, and so received sums back from the (then) Inland Revenue, now HMRC.

Attendance at talks was increasing until a talk on death pushed numbers up so much that Julia Sealey, the Museum Gallery Services Manager at the Castle, had to tell us that we were exceeding Health and Safety approved numbers and would have to move our lectures to a new site. After some searching, Lion Walk United Reform Church was identified as the best available location, effective from April 1999. Originally, there was car parking beside the church and parking was available in both Vineyard Street and St John's Street, with bus services nearby. The meeting that precipitated our move was given by a pair of enthusiastic American historians on the Colchester equivalent of the Great Plague of London in 1665, in percentage terms worse here than in London. It certainly filled the room – the phrase “hanging from the rafters” came to mind.

It is worth considering the best lectures and the most popular categories. Clearly from the experience above “death” is certainly a popular subject. Pubs were also always popular, and brought their own audience. The expert on Local Pubs was our member Jess Jephcott, who claimed to have carried out much research before he published his book. Medical matters are also popular, and the Siege of Colchester usually brings good numbers.

It is always a good plan to put COLCHESTER in the title of the talk, whilst sport, religion and real politics do not draw crowds, no matter how good the speaker. On the other hand I still remember with awe a definitive talk on Colchester Chartists given by Arthur Brown, head of History at the Colchester Royal Grammar School, delivered without notes, slides or PowerPoint. It is rare indeed to have a speaker now without a laptop or memory stick.

Unusual subjects included a fine talk on Colchester United FC, and the description by of an order of nuns escaping from Revolutionary France via coal barges, canals and the North Sea to finally settle at New Hall, near Chelmsford. A certain success was David Forder telling us how he came to be manager at the Old Rep Theatre at the Albert Hall, then at the Mercury – all straight from the horse's mouth! There were several memorable talks from John Ashdown Hill, a teacher at Woodbridge, the man who calculated the exact location of the body of King Richard III, and how DNA worked, so that they could prove if any remains were genuine. (They did). This was about ten years before the body was discovered as predicted. Likewise, it was exciting to hear from Phillip Crummy about the discovery of the Roman Circus. Another purely local subject was the history of Colchester's Lock Hospital from Dr Jane Pearson. Mark Davies and Philip Crummy told us about Roman Colchester, whilst Andrew Phillips and Patrick Denney tended to concentrate on Colchester from Victoria through to Elizabeth II, with Andrew the expert on the Paxman's story. Peter Jones has an interest in Trams and Transport, whilst Sir Bob Russell told us about Colchester Schools. Local artist Charles Debenham spoke to us about his paintings of local buildings – houses and shops – after we had bought his view old Colchester High Street, which he agreed to repair free.

In 2010 the Castle Museum closed to allow improvements to the Castle Gallery to improve visitor facilities and displays. This was a major Lottery funded project and the fact that the Friends provided £30,000 (over 3 years – our biggest single contribution to the Museum) in support helped the Museum to prove to the Lottery authorities that it was well supported locally. Members enjoyed visiting the “empty” Castle to see the bare walls and hear more of the history, before the works started.

After the completion of the project in 2014, prior to reopening, a private Royal Visit from HRH Princess Anne, the Princess Royal, took place, guided by Tom Hodgson from the Museum Service. Mark Davies, representing the Friends, was presented and proudly showed her a display cabinet that we had purchased. Other committee members were able to watch, along with the Lord Lieutenant and other dignitaries, as HRH and Tom Hodgson toured the new galleries, but had to keep a respectful distance.

To commemorate the start of World War I in 2014, we were addressed by Taff Gillingham, an advisor on WWI for films and TV. He dressed one of our members up in uniform and weapons ready for the Trenches, after which he could barely move, let alone march.

There were also our trips. One of the most unusual was arranged by Patrick Denney with the support of Bob Russell MP (as was necessary then) to the Houses of Parliament on 30th May 2003. MPs were not sitting at the time but it was fascinating to see some ministers and Westminster Hall, the Chambers of the Commons and the Lords. The full coach moved on, after the visit, to the Museum of London and my memory is that I had to give the coach driver directions, not that I was that sure myself.

There was a successful visit to the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge (where a fellow committee member grabbed me and hissed “Why didn't you tell me that this place was so wonderful?”) An evening tour of Bury St Edmunds produced a similar result. We also visited Gressenhall, (the Norfolk Workhouse Museum) and Bletchley Park, home of WWII code breakers.

We visited Quex House, a stately home in Kent, then stopped off at Margate to look at the new Tate Gallery. Later, when Jenny Jones took on the role of Trips and Talks Organiser, we had two full coaches visiting Battle Abbey, then moving along the Sussex coast to Hastings, complete with a new Pier, for the rest of the day. One coach started at Battle and moved on to Hastings, whilst the other coach did the journey in reverse. There was also a very popular and well subscribed trip to Syon House and another to Dover Castle in 2013.

In 2012 Andrew Philips retired as Chairman and was succeeded by Mark Davies, formerly General Manager of the Colchester Museums. Mark had excellent links with the Colchester Archaeological Trust and the Essex Society for Archaeology and History, both of which he had chaired, and other local groups.

For many years, the Friends had a presence at the Annual Castle Open Evening, held on Wednesday evening in December, when the town had late night shopping. No admission is charged and the Friends provide mulled wine and fruit juice and the Museum obtains “sponsored” mince pies. It was an opportunity to explain our role, to recruit and sometimes display an item that we have purchased. One year it was the Charles Debenham painting of High Street about 1955. A visitor remarked at it was exactly what Colchester looked like when she moved to the town herself at that time.

It was at one of these evenings that Peter Berridge called to committee aside and told us, with great excitement, that the Museum team had been approached by Ipswich Borough Council to take over the management and direction of the Ipswich Museums, which they felt could benefit from Colchester's style and imagination. It was secret at the time but after negotiations, the current “Colchester and Ipswich Museums Service” came into being. It was an attractive idea as the two towns had complimentary collections; Colchester having a nationally important Roman Collection and pre-Roman links, whilst Ipswich was better with Saxon history. Colchester had a Norman Castle and Ipswich had Christchurch Mansion. The Ipswich Art Collection was much more substantial than ours, and so on. Both Museums had Natural History collections, but with distinct characters. Discussions were at an early stage but Ipswich Borough Council was extremely keen to pursue it. A merger was agreed by both the Councils in July 2006 and came into effect July 2007. It was made clear that this would not affect our status with Colchester Museums, and the Friends of Ipswich Museums would also continue independently, but with similar aims.

The operation of the Friends continued without significant change, though the method of contact for the committee had been by email since the 1990s. Records were kept on line – membership, minutes and accounts. A website was established and has been developed.

The role of the secretary was a substantial one, including organising talks, trips and meetings. The burden had been eased when committee member Peter Constable, a retired graphic designer, took responsibility for the newsletter and printing. By the time Patrick Denney had retired as Secretary, the talks and trips duties had become a separate role. Mark Davies invited Janet Fulford, former Borough Councillor and Mayor, to become our Secretary. This was timely because Janet had had experience of updating the constitutions of other local groups following changes in Charity law. Janet saw the process through successfully, with the largely unchanged constitution resembling the style of other local groups. The Charity Commission was content. When Janet died in 2020, she left the Friends a handsome bequest.

In 2019 we were approached the Friends of Colchester Roman Wall to take custody of their remaining funds. They had completed their target of creating information panels around the circuit of the wall and were closing. We agreed to look after the remaining £5538, received in 2021/2 and use it for any additional panels repairs to the existing panels. The project had been established by Henry Spyvee at end of his Mayorality in 2010.

Shortly after Patrick retired as Chair, in 2020, the Covid crisis hit the country and the Friends had to halt all activities temporarily. Peter Jones, as Chair, saw the Society through the crisis. Live lectures were cancelled but a programme of Zoom talks, facilitated by Patrick Denney was very popular. Jenny Jones had organised trips to Stow Maries Airfield and the Stowmarket Museum of Food for 2020, and Joy Hopkinson eventually lead the visits in 2023. The committee was somewhat revitalised in 2022 when several new members were elected. Ray Cantrell was elected as chair, as the 75th anniversary of our foundation approached.

We have received bequests in the past from the estates of members, or money given in their memory, but in 2023 we discovered that the Friends of Colchester Museums had been included, with a number of other charitable groups, in the will of Andrew Millar, who had been a member and a committee member for over 20 years. Andrew, who was blind, had been a town guide and Chairman of our sister local history society, Colchester Recalled, the oral history group. In spare time, he took part active sports, including sailing the Caribbean in his 70s. His bequest was £40,325 and leaves the society in a good financial state for a further 25 years.