

Friends of the Willis Museum Autumn Newsletter 2009



The Friends was founded in 1978 to promote, support and improve the Willis Museum. Meetings are held at the Museum on the third Thursday evening of each month from January to July and September to December with other events throughout the year

Annual Membership £8
Visitor for one evening £2
Registered Charity No: 280406

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OFFICERS:

Chairman:

Mr A Roach

Vice Chairman/

Programme Secretary:

Mr D Anthony

Minutes Secretary:

Mrs B Hollands

Secretary:

VACANT

Treasurer:

Mr A Fielding

Publicity Officer:

Mr J Hollands

Committee:

Mr M Dyer

Mrs M Mott

Mr D Wren

Charity No.280406

CHAIRMAN'S JOTTINGS

ALAN ROACH

Because of health reasons I have decided not to seek re-election as Chairman at the AGM in October. I have enjoyed my time in the chair but I am conscious that, in the coming years, the role will require someone with more energy than I am able to muster.

There will be other vacancies on the Committee and nomination forms will be distributed at our September meeting. You are also reminded that we need someone to take over the running of our monthly raffle.

You would all have received a copy of the survey drawn up by your committee to seek your views on how the museum should develop in the future. We are optimistically looking for 100% response to the survey which should be returned by 17 September.

We are arranging a programme of ten talks in 2010 and at the time of writing this is almost complete. Subjects include:-

- a) Development of the British sword by Ian Williams, one of our members.
- b) Part II of the Story of Thornycroft by Chris Tree
- c) Updating the Victorian County History by Professor Jean Morrin from the University of Winchester. Several of our members are involved locally in this mammoth task which is almost a scaled down Domesday Book.

THE VYNE AUTUMN FAIR, SUNDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 11AM – 4PM

A date for your diaries to visit the historic house and garden's local fair. Entry is free and the programme includes demonstrations of traditional woodland trades, garden tours, tombola and a hog roast. There will also be local produce stalls and the Friends will have a publicity stand.

TEA FOR TRELOARS - SATURDAY 24 OCTOBER 1 – 3PM TO BE HELD AT THE WILLIS MUSEUM

The Willis and Friends will be holding a fund raising event for Treloars and it is hoped that as many of you who can will come along and give support. Tea and cake will be served, there will also be a Treloars stall selling Christmas cards and Christmas puddings (I can thoroughly recommend them, they are delicious) and other stalls will be organised including a tombola.

All money taken will be donated to Treloars to assist them in the wonderful work they do.

If any member is willing to make a few cakes, or a cake, that would be very much appreciated. Any donations for the tombola would also be appreciated, please bring them along to the 15 October meeting. Cakes could be taken into the museum a day or so prior to the event.

Please make a note in your diary and come along and support the event.

DORIS ROACH

CHINA: JOURNEY TO THE EAST

THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION AT THE WILLIS MUSEUM

BILL FERGIE

The wet and gloomy evening of Thursday 6 August did not detract from the mood and colour of the traditional entertainment which accompanied the opening ceremony.

A large marquee had been erected on the southern side of the Market Place which left a large performance area in front of the Museum. The rain prevented the use of the latter so the opening speeches were made with everyone crowded into the marquee.



Yinnon Ezra, the County Council's Director of Culture, Communities and Rural Affairs, welcomed the initiative of the British Museum in taking some of its most important artefacts on tour, and explained that Basingstoke was sharing the privilege of hosting the exhibition with some eminent towns and cities.

Lord Sainsbury of Preston Candover then conducted the formal opening ceremony. He was followed by Jessica Harrison-Hall, Curator of Chinese Ceramics and Vietnamese Art at The British Museum, who explained the five themes of the exhibition: Technology, Writing and Language, Festivals and Beliefs, Food and Drink, and Play and Performance.

The last of these themes was illustrated by an excerpt from a traditional opera which followed the speech-making. The performance had to be projected across the rain swept Market Place to the audience in the marquee by the beautifully dressed singer sheltering under the porch of the Willis.

Our curator, Sue, had managed to find room on the top floor for the subsequent Lion Dance and although it was a bit cramped it was quite exciting to be up close and personal with a very lively lion, which took a few liberties as it moved among the audience at the end of its performance. The rather warm, but clearly very fit, young lady and gentleman, who finally emerged from the costume, received equally warm applause for their energetic performance.



Lord Sainsbury feeding the lion, watched by the Mayor and Mayoress

A traditional shadow puppet show concluded the entertainment and then it was back through the rain to the marquee for a Chinese buffet provided by the AM Restaurant in Winchester Street.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

You may find it helpful to be reminded of what Mr Willis believed the Basingstoke Museum could do.

At its opening in 1931 he said 'The aim of the museum is to explain Basingstoke. Starting with fossils...going on to relics of prehistoric man, continuing with artefacts and documents...from roman times to the present day, photographs also being used for the last hundred years'.

The China Exhibition illustrates how much can be learned of one of the world's great civilisations by seeing and sometimes handling historic objects from that country.

THE RENEWED WILLIS MUSEUM

I hope since the re-opening in May that all of you will have visited the new Sainsbury Gallery at the Willis Museum. I am very proud to be the Curator of the Willis, I do a job I love in a building that is very important to Basingstoke and to me. This project has been the culmination of years of work and persuasion and the results have exceeded even my expectations.

The Willis Museum and the Old Town Hall hold a special place in the hearts of Basingstoke people. I know this because people tell me all the time. As soon as they learn who I am they tell me their memories of the Old Town Hall, these often make me smile and sometimes make me cry. There were the two old gentlemen who told me, with a twinkle in their eyes, about the many times they met the magistrate “underneath the clock” on a Saturday morning after their Friday night high-jinks. Or the lady who collected her baby from the Old Town Hall after his adoption was approved and she took him home for the very first time.



This time last year if we had stood in what is now the Sainsbury Gallery, very few of us could have realised that we were standing in such a magnificent and historic space. It was a space that could only be described as grotty, it had all the character and ambiance of a 1980s office block! Since its completion in 1831 the Old Town Hall has witnessed succeeding generations gradually remove nearly every trace of what was a fine building. Designed by one of the country's leading Regency architects Lewis Wyatt, the original features were either removed, or at best, covered over, as each generation imposed its own tastes and fashions.

Above our heads, there were no less than two suspended ceilings, installed to cover successive water, heating, gas and electrical installations. Each redundant system had been simply shut off and kept exactly as it was while new piping and cabling was laid underneath. And when the ceiling space was filled with pipes and cables they simply lowered the ceiling to make room for more pipes and cables, until eventually the cornice and the tops of the fine arched windows were covered over.

In the 1860s, when this previously open space was enclosed and partitioned into rooms that provided offices for the Town Clerk, Borough Treasurer and Borough Surveyor, the cast iron columns which are again visible were boxed in.

In the 1980s the building underwent another major refurbishment into modern office accommodation. Original features including fire places, dado rails, chandeliers and windows were either removed or in the best case covered over. We are fortunate that in the Sainsbury Gallery the columns and cornice, although in a distressed state, were left in situ.

In the Sainsbury Gallery the project team removed:

- Two suspended ceilings.
- Several tonnes of major steel work that reinforced the dance floor above in the 1960s (so definitely no jiving at the next Christmas party!)
- An intricate network of over head pipes.
- Miles of cables that disappeared into obscure spaces in the building.



Sainsbury Gallery 16 October 2008



Main Gallery with exposed beams

All this mentions nothing of the more difficult tasks they had overcome transforming this site into the Sainsbury Gallery, a space suitable to host exhibitions from National Museums and some of the finest collections in the country. The gallery then had to be turned into a high security box, while at the same time restoring the original features that had just been revealed, so for example:

- New oak flooring was laid.
- Dim and black out blinds on all 16 windows.
- 330ft of plaster cornice restored, the Friends of the Willis donated £5,000 which paid for the restoration of this stunning feature.
- And without giving away too many details the glass on all the windows, doors and draught lobby is armour shielded well over 10mm thick, heavy weight stuff!

Those who made the project happen are due great thanks.

- Lord and Lady Sainsbury of Preston Candover, who set the ball rolling with a donation of £45,000 towards the cost of restoring and fitting out the gallery named in their honour.
- Ian Smith, of Hampshire Museums and Galleries Trust, has always been unswerving in his support, and in securing support from others.
- The Friends of the Willis, who as always are unstinting in their support and ambitions for the museum.
- Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, who have jointly funded the Willis Museum for over a decade, made a special contribution towards the design work and graphics.
- MLA Renaissance SouthEast, which is lead by Hampshire County Council Museums Service, contributed over £100,000 towards the project.
- Hampshire County Council Architects Department who have not only contributed their expertise in specifying the gallery and managing the project, but they were also able to programme the Sainsbury Gallery project and the roof repairs together, which provided cost savings to both partners. They also donated the Victorian marble fire place in the café, which was little more than a collection of fragments which they have restored.
- The Recreation and Heritage Capital projects team and Property Services Access Team, who provided money for accessible visitor toilets, something the public have often requested.
- The DCMS / Wolfson Foundation, who provided a grant of £50,000 towards the high security cases and display equipment.



Left –

Staircase 16 October 2008

SO HAS ALL THIS EFFORT BEEN WORTH IT?

The Old Town Hall has become the Willis Museum's first and most important object, the decades of additions and 'improvements' have been stripped back and as much as possible of the original building restored. An important part of Basingstoke's heritage has been retained and preserved to an excellent standard, it is truly a local place to be proud of. It also now has a water tight roof to help preserve the treasures on display inside.

The Sainsbury Gallery will feature exhibitions from National Museums and some of the finest museum collections in the country. The first of these is the British Museum's 'China: Journey to the East' which is currently touring major cities like Bristol, Coventry, Manchester, Sunderland, York and now Basingstoke. It will give access to national collections to local and Hampshire people.



The new Basingstoke Gallery on the first floor will provide a venue to local artists, groups and societies, to host their exhibitions in a high quality space. This new dedicated community exhibition space has increased the number of exhibition slots open for local people from two to eleven. With exhibitions changing every few months in the Sainsbury Gallery and every six weeks in the Community Gallery there will always be something new for visitors to see.

Sainsbury Gallery window refurbishment

The museum has improved visitor facilities, important to today's generation of museum visitors including:

- The new stunning cafe, with a restored marble fire place, crystal chandelier and soon the drape, made by Whitchurch Silk Mill exclusively for the Willis, will decorate the window.
- All important visitor conveniences
- A new shop featuring cards, locally made gifts and produce.
- A bespoke display case, which will feature locally made crafts.

The aim of this whole project, including the Sainsbury Gallery, was to develop a modern, flexible museum while at the same time creating high quality spaces, which could be more responsive to the demands of our community, provide top quality visitor facilities and to work in partnership with as many people and organisations as we could. One of our aims was to create a museum fit for the 21st century.

As you will have seen from the article in 'Friends United' response to the new gallery has been overwhelmingly positive. The China Exhibition has now opened and we are welcoming over 300 visitors a day, we are estimating that we will receive 7,500 visitors this month, a 47% increase on last August. Yesterday a Grandmother visiting with her three lively pre-teen grandchildren commented that she did not expect her grandchildren could have fun in a museum, but they had! Mr Willis would have been proud!

Sue Tapliss

Curator, The Willis Museum

Recreation and Heritage, Hampshire County Council

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<http://www.hants.gov.uk/willis-museum>

Why not Facebook the Willis at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=25620945048>

THERE ARE MANY EVENTS FOR GROWN-UPS AND CHILDREN ALIKE

THURSDAY 20 AUGUST, 10AM, 11.30AM AND 1.30PM

TAI CHI WORKSHOPS – FREE BUT BOOKING ESSENTIAL

Tai Chi can be best described as a moving form of yoga and meditation combined. Derived from martial arts, this fun activity is suitable for all the family at any age.

FRIDAY 21 AUGUST AND THURSDAY 27 AUGUST, 10.30AM – 12.30PM AND 2 – 4PM

CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY – FREE BUT BOOKING ESSENTIAL

Calligraphy is a mental exercise that coordinates the mind and the body to choose the best styling in expressing the content of the passage. Through the session you will even have the opportunity to get your hands on trying your own names in Chinese calligraphy!

FRIDAY 21 AUGUST AND FRIDAY 28 AUGUST, 6PM – 7.30PM

CHINESE MANDARIN WORKSHOP FOR ADULTS – FREE BUT BOOKING ESSENTIAL

You will learn basic Mandarin Chinese for everyday conversation, travel abroad, or at business level. Also, the tutor will introduce you how to use a computer to write and read Chinese, or your names!

STARTING THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER, 11AM – 12NOON

MANDARIN COURSE FOR ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS

Why learn Mandarin Chinese? Chinese is spoken by around 20% of the world's population. China has massive economic growth and influence. That influence is set to continue. With thousands of years of history, Chinese culture is endlessly fascinating. Whether your interests are in history, architecture, music, or cuisine, a knowledge of Mandarin will enrich your understanding.

**3 SEPTEMBER, 10 SEPTEMBER, 17 SEPTEMBER, 24 SEPTEMBER, 1 OCTOBER AND 8 OCTOBER
SIX WEEK COURSE 11AM – 12NOON. COURSE FEE £30.**

However, course fee is refundable, if all six sessions are completed. All places must be booked in advance.

THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER, 7.30PM – 9PM

LECTURE: PERFORMANCE ART AND LEISURE IN IMPERIAL CHINA

An illustrated talk by Dr Laura Newby of Oxford University. **COST: £3.**

THURSDAY 10 SEPTEMBER, 7.30PM – 9PM

LECTURE: CHINA JOURNEY TO THE EAST

Jessica Harrison-Hall, Curator of Chinese Ceramics and Vietnamese Art from the Department of Asia at the British Museum will introduce the exhibition's five main themes: language + writing, technology + inventions, food + drink, festivals + beliefs and play leisure. **COST: £3.**

THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER, 7.30PM – 9PM

LECTURE: XINRAN

Hear acclaimed author Xinran speak about her research and writing. Xinran was born in Beijing and was a successful journalist and radio presenter in China. In 1997 she moved to London where she began working on her seminal book 'The Good Women of China'. Since then she has written a regular column for the Guardian, appearing on radio and television and published a number of titles. Her latest book is 'China Witness: Voices from a Silent Generation'. It charts the huge changes in China over a century, told through the lives of everyday heroes. Books available for sale and signing on the night. **COST: £3.**

THURSDAY 8 OCTOBER, 7.30PM – 9PM
LECTURE: FROM TERRACOTTA ARMY TO JADE SUITS - A GOLDEN AGE IN CHINESE HISTORY (221 BC – AD 220)

Some of the most striking and evocative artistic and archaeological objects ever found in China date from the Qin and Han dynasties, which spanned four centuries from 221 BC – AD 220. This period marks the beginning of the Chinese Empire which was to endure until 1911 and one of the defining, golden ages of Chinese history.

Carol Michaelson is a curator of Chinese Art in the British Museum where she has worked for the last eighteen years, specializing in Chinese jade. **COST: £3.**

THURSDAY 22 OCTOBER, 11AM – 12NOON
CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY – INTRODUCTION FOR ADULT BEGINNERS

Calligraphy is an art dating back to the earliest day of history, and widely practiced throughout China to this day. Although it uses Chinese words as its vehicle of expression, one does

not have to know Chinese to appreciate its beauty. **COST £5.**

THURSDAY 12 NOVEMBER, 7.30PM – 9PM
LECTURE: REVOLUTIONARY ART AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM
PROPAGANDA AND DISSENT: REVOLUTIONARY ART AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM

In revolutionary and wartime societies, propaganda is considered a vital part of education and political participation. Propaganda encourages or condemns; reinforces existing attitudes and behaviour; promotes social membership within nation, class or work unit. Where political transformation (communist revolution, end of colonial rule) has occurred before widespread modernization, with the majority population illiterate, imagery was the most effective way to communicate the message. This talk highlights the important themes, symbols and styles employed in propaganda art. **COST £3.**



DEREK WREN

What more can I say about the China Exhibition, which will be at the Willis Museum until Christmas Eve, except ***'go and see it, not once but at least twice'***.

You may expect, as Margaret and I did, larger exhibits so don't let your first reactions disappoint you. The wealth of artefacts on show confirm what Chinese friends have always told us that almost everything we think of as Western was either discovered or invented by the Chinese a thousand years earlier. Jade was carved as far back as 7000BC, writing first used around 1200BC and noodles were being cooked before 220AD, a thousand years before the Venetian traveller Marco Polo reached China.

The exhibition is free so take your friends. Experts from the British Museum are resident for the duration of the exhibition and are with us to explain the significance of the exhibits. Basingstoke is indeed lucky to have been chosen to display this exhibition which has now travelled to six places around Britain. This would not have happened if the Museum had not received the support of the Linbury Trust to create the Sainsbury Gallery.

REPORT OF THE ANNUAL SKITTLES MATCH AGAINST THE FRIENDS OF THE CURTIS MUSEUM 7 MAY 2009 AT THE JOLLY MILLER, NORTH WARNBOROUGH

JUDY MELLUISH

As usual, this event was well attended and a jolly time was had by all. The supper was served early and was followed by a raffle to boost the funds of both groups. At the break the scores stood at 54 to the Willis Wanderers and 45 to the Curtis Crushers. There were accusations by some of collaboration between members of the two teams – completely unfounded, of course!

At the end of the first round the scores were Wanderers 101, Crushers 86. The Crushers were overheard to be given instructions not to hold back but not to score more than the chairman. Their scores improved and the tension mounted. A certain amount of integration took place and it became even more tense – free transfers were discussed. There were no strikes tonight with the top score 8. Final scores were Willis Wanderers 205 and Curtis Crushers 174.

The Curtis may have been **CRUSHED** but they were magnanimous in defeat. However there were a few 'tantrums and tears' and calls for new glasses to be sought. Kate announced she was starting a collection of wooden spoons in readiness for the stirring of her Christmas puddings and she said that the Curtis had to let the Willis have the cup this year as something splendid was needed to put on display in the new Museum.

Alan gave no victory speech as he was 'lost for words' however he was glad the **WONDERFUL WILLIS** were able to take back the cup in celebration of the re-opening of the Willis Museum and Sainsbury Gallery. He was unsure if the cost of the engraving could be afforded and wondered if the cup had been valued. A new wooden spoon is to be purchased so that the Curtis can go away next year with a full set and it was suggested that next time they bring with them a proper team!

Well done all, another great night and thanks to all the helpers.

VISITS TO BEAUREPAIRE PARK AND ST JAMES'S CHURCH, BRAMLEY

EDNA + ALAN FIELDING

Wednesday 1 July was an extremely hot day, cooling off a little by the evening, when thirteen members met in Bramley so we could visit Beaurepaire Park an estate of about 300 acres. This visit had been arranged for us by Bill Fergie to coincide with our visit to Bramley Church that same evening.



Beaurepaire is a moated medieval site and there must have been a number of grand houses over the years, but the most recent mansion was destroyed by fire in 1941 and largely demolished in 1942. The servant's wing remained and was converted into the present house that we see today and is still an impressive building. We had to drive through electronically operated iron gates and up about a mile long drive before turning onto a wooden bridge over the moat, before catching sight of the house.

On our arrival the owner, Mrs Cremin, came out to welcome us into the loggia/conservatory part of the house where we were offered refreshments. During this interlude Mr Timmins, a local historian, gave us an interesting brief history of the house. We then walked with Mrs Cremin and Mr Timmins around part of the grounds, over an old suspension bridge across the moat, and saw in some undergrowth there was an old ruin of an icehouse covered in brambles and ivy. While on our walk across the meadows and the former fishponds we set the wildlife hopping and darting and as we passed over the moat again we paused to inspect evidence of big fresh water mussels there.

Back at the house we were invited to see some of the ground floor rooms one of which the family use as a sitting room and this had the big bread ovens in the wall, evidence this was part of the servant's quarters.

Unfortunately we had to make this a fairly short visit as we had to meet up with John Walker and other members for our visit to Bramley Church but we sincerely hope there will be a next time.

Within the Friends of the Willis membership we have someone who is a 'big noise' in Bramley. To be more precise, John Walker is a bell ringer (campanologist) at St James's church – amongst his many other attributes – and when the party eventually returned from Beaurepaire House to the church John met us and immediately introduced us to the art of bell ringing. It seems like awfully hard exercise but there is nothing quite like that lovely sound ringing out across the English countryside.



There was a church recorded at Bramley in the Domesday records of 1086 but the present church is said to date from about 1160. Our group, now up to nineteen members, were shown how to handle the ropes and those that wished could 'feel' what it was like to swing a big heavy bell. Ian Murray had obviously done it before as he had a good 'workout'.

Next John took us up the bell tower and told those that had got that far about the eight tightly packed bells – while we were 'perched' precariously on various beams – 'Elf + Safety' would have had a fit! The only place in the tower left to go then was onwards and upwards which involved a vertical ladder to the roof hatch.

About five of us 'escaped' out into the fresh air, the tower being very dusty and warm, to a very nice all-round view, standing on the roof beneath the Union flag flying from the flagpole. We could just see the tops of the AA building and the Churchill Plaza over the trees in the distance.

Returning down the assault course to the ground floor, nave and chancel, we were shown the medieval wall paintings, the oldest to be uncovered so far is believed to date from the early 1200s. This depicts the 'Slaying of Thomas a Becket by Henry II Knights'. With various heraldic shields, and many other interesting features, some of great age, such as the font, there is plenty to see. All of this has been put into a little book that can be obtained (for a small donation) from inside the church.

After a look around the churchyard it was time to go to the third attraction that evening, just up the road, and after parking the cars we were shown what looked like a big wooden barn perched on saddle stones adjacent to the road opposite a farm. But this barn held an extraordinary secret.

It had been a mobile barn – not something that would come to mind unless told, considering its size. Mr Ken Hume, who is passionate about trees and wood, told us all about its known history and how he had tried to decipher all the internal alterations to the structure. This was something he and Bill Fergie could discuss at length.

And so ended a delightful, warm and sunny evening.

Our thanks to Mrs Cremin of Beaurepaire House, John Walker, and Ken Hume.