

Draft

NASNEWS

February 2002

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE'S HERITAGE IN CRISIS

As you may have seen in the local press, concern has been mounting over a series of threats to Northamptonshire's museums and heritage services.

At Northampton Museum, 'Best Value' review recommendations have coincided with the depleted state of Northampton Borough Council's finances. Three museum stores are to be shoehorned into a 'new' town centre store, requiring disposal of 25% of the collections, including the 'Museum of Leathercraft', owned by an independent trust, the county's archaeology, geological and natural history collections plus weeding out of 'core' collections. A long term solution for storage of the county archaeological archives is being sought by the other local authorities in Northamptonshire but what will happen to the other Northampton collections, which part of the country might they be shipped off to? Seven posts are proposed to disappear- 3 managers would be reduced to 2 with a Community History and Art Officer replacing the 3 existing keepers of Archaeology, Art and Social History respectively. There will no longer be a Conservator (at a time when objects are being prepared for new Heritage Lottery and other funded displays of the Boot & Shoe Collection and when full scale moving of collections into the new store is planned with all the implications of environmental monitoring and control). A policy has been approved which will have "less emphasis on preservation and collections, less specific functions and specific posts, less of a serious and sombre atmosphere". This has raised considerable local concerns that a once fine local public service is being run down. The education service, the backbone of the Museum service, is to be merged with another section of the directorate. Management for exhibitions may also be slipping into another area of responsibility. Whilst there is some sensible rationalisation in these areas, which would reduce duplication, there is also a danger of fragmentation of the service.

At a time when television programmes, such as 'Time Team' have generated such a wave of interest in archaeology and local history, Northampton Museum is reducing its collections and services.

There is little cheer from Daventry Museum either. Daventry District Council is currently proposing to withdraw its support for its museum's lottery project, although this has generated a lot of public anxiety and a major campaign by the Friends of the Museum to keep the project. The museum has also suffered reductions in front of house staffing levels, leading to a reduction in opening hours. The Museum is also suffering the cumulative effects of lack of adequate building maintenance. If the lottery project does not go ahead, the museum has no realistic prospect of achieving disabled access. The current situation is that Daventry District Council have given the Friends of Daventry Museum until February (2 months) in which to raise a quarter of a million pounds to support the lottery project

Thankfully, a threat of redundancies at Northamptonshire County Council's Historic Environment Team, whose duties include maintenance of Northamptonshire's Sites and Monuments Record (SMR), appears recently to have been lifted – for the time being at least. The deferment of a decision by the Heritage Lottery Fund is meanwhile placing doubt on the future of the Northamptonshire Finds Liaison Officer's post, part of the pilot scheme for what had been anticipated should develop into a national network later this year.

Politics allied with pressures to reduce council budgets and implement 'Best Value' programmes appear to be behind most of these decisions.

Northamptonshire Archaeological Society will be writing to Northampton and Daventry Councils and MPs expressing great concern at these events and their long term impact on the future viability and quality of service at Northampton and Daventry museums. At a time when archaeology and local history have never been more popular these moves appear to be a retrograde step. The NAS Council strongly urges members who share these concerns to write and express them to Northampton Borough Council, to Daventry District Council, to their local Councillors and MPs. Whatever you do may help to save invaluable but vulnerable assets for generations to come. If you feel strongly, please act now - final decisions are being made! Please help to protect our museums and our future heritage.

Martin Tingle Chairman NAS

NAS COUNCIL CHANGES

Following the AGM held last October and the departure of Mark Curteis from the county we have been fortunate in obtaining the services of Andy Chapman as Secretary, and as Meetings Secretary. A warm welcome to them both. After many years sterling service as Secretary, Dr Mark Curteis has moved to Essex having taken up a new job with Essex Record Office. Mark will be greatly missed as will his locally available expertise with Roman and Celtic coinage. We wish both Mark and his wife Fiona all very best wishes. Thanks are also due to Brian Giggins for his informative and entertaining lecture delivered at the NAS AGM.

Northamptonshire Archaeology Volume 29

Volume 29 is at the printers and should be available to paid up members later this spring. Editor Martin Tingle is now accepting papers and notes offered for publication in the volume 30.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

All members are reminded that subscriptions for 2001/2002 were due on 1st September 2001. Subscription rates remain unchanged at £10 for individuals, £12 family, £8 student and £15 Local Association. We would encourage members to sign up to Gift Aid as this provides some valuable additional income to your Society. **Please send subscriptions and requests for a Gift Aid form to Martin Tingle, The Dial House, High St, Creton, Northants NN6 8NA as soon as possible.**

We welcome items to include in NASNEWS. Deadline for inclusion in the next issue is the end of April 2002.

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