

Museums for changing lives

Studies in Partnership: The Greater Fens Museums Partnership



Acknowledgements

The work described in this booklet is supported by Renaissance, the MLA's ground-breaking programme which is transforming England's non-national museums. It strives for excellence, and through targeted investment, and cultivation of local, regional and national partnerships, it is realising the sector's potential to make a real difference to people's lives. Central government funding is enabling regional museums across the country to raise their standards and deliver real results in support of education, learning, community development and economic regeneration.

In the East of England, Renaissance is managed by the Renaissance East of England Office, and delivered by the four large museum services which together make up the East of England Museum Hub:

- Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service
- The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge
- Luton Culture
- Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service

You can read more about the impact of the Renaissance programme in the East of England by visiting our website: www.mla.gov.uk/renaissanceeastofengland



The
Fitzwilliam
Museum



Cover Image: Community event
for Fenland Stories exhibition

Contents

4 Greater Fens Museums
Partnership: In a nutshell

5 Foreword

6 Introduction

Case Studies

8 *The Feast of Fenland* exhibition

10 *The Fenland Stories* exhibition

12 The benefits of working
in partnership

14 Future plans

15 Greater Fens Museums
Partnership: List of partners

Greater Fens Museums Partnership: In a nutshell

20

museum partners in the GFMP across Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Norfolk

“Overall the increased opportunities for networking among the area’s museums have been an entirely positive experience.” Chairman, March & District Museum

“Being part of the working group that produced the exhibition has also been an important part of my development as a professional and given me access to training that I would not have otherwise had.” Elie Hughes, Curator, Ely Museum

“My father was born on a farm...in 1903 and I realise how hard his parents must have worked.” Visitor to *Feast of Fenland* exhibition

“It was good for community links to invite villagers into school.” Teacher from Emneth Primary School commenting on their Fenland History Week inspired by *The Feast of Fenland* exhibition

“We need more events like this so that people can see that we are all the same.” Migrant worker, international food day at Ayscough Hall as part of the *Feast of Fenland* project

14,000

participants in the *Feast of Fenland* project

2,000

school children involved in *Feast of Fenland* events

“Normally people associate museums with like... dinosaurs... but I think it’s good to get teenagers and children really interested in everything to see what museums can be about.” Young participant in the *Fenland Stories* film project

Foreword

In the current economic climate there is a greater emphasis than ever on working in partnership to deliver services more efficiently and more responsively to local needs.

This booklet is one in a series of six highlighting ongoing projects led by East of England museums which have partnership working at their heart. Taken together they demonstrate that museums have a valuable contribution to make in:

- Engaging local people in decision-making
- Promoting community cohesion through exploration and celebration of the past
- Providing economic benefits through employment and tourism.

Communities benefit when museums share resources and expertise with each other:

- **The Greater Fens Museums Partnership and Maritime Heritage East** are networks which bring together museums with similar collections to celebrate and promote unique aspects of the region's past. Economies of scale are combined with a richer offering to the public and more effective promotion of heritage to visitors.
- **Something Borrowed** is a partnership with the British Museum which is enabling smaller museums in the East of England to borrow items from the BM's collections, creating new opportunities for tourism and learning.

Museums are also working increasingly with partners beyond the cultural sector:

- **Growing Communities** provides a forum for museums, local communities and planning departments in Growth Point areas in the region to explore how the past can help shape future development
- **Stepping Stones** has brought together 24 museums in a partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions to create 32 jobs and apprenticeships for long-term unemployed young people
- **The Sustainability Project** is unlocking the potential of rural life museums to engage the public in debate around environmental and social issues, as well as joining forces with other organisations to find ways of reducing the sector's carbon footprint.

This work is supported by Renaissance, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council's ground-breaking programme that is transforming England's non-national museums. The staff leading these projects are funded by Renaissance East of England which has also developed the strategic vision and infrastructure to help the sector become more outward-looking and innovative.

The projects showcased in this series show museums have a part to play in making the Big Society a reality – by providing a unique space for communities to learn about their past and get involved in shaping their future.

Vanessa Trevelyan
Head of Norfolk Museums &
Archaeology Service
President, Museums Association
October 2010

Introduction



**THE GREATER FENS
MUSEUMS PARTNERSHIP**

“The Greater Fens Museum Partnership has been brilliant...The museums have all benefited, not just from a temporary exhibition and an events budget but, more importantly, the project enabled the museums to make contact with new communities in their locality or with new audiences.”

Kate Brown, Museum Development Officer, Cambridgeshire

The Greater Fens Museums Partnership (GFMP) was formed in 2005 to enable museums in the Fenland area to work together to improve standards and foster more in-depth engagement with local communities. There is an emphasis on developing projects and activities

which celebrate the unique identity and history of the Fens and so encourage residents to take pride in their area.

The partnership grew out of a conviction that museums have a unique contribution to make in addressing a number of issues that are specific to the Fens including:

- Rural isolation
- Low aspirations, economic deprivation and low educational attainment
- Issues around community cohesion particularly regarding attitudes towards migrant workers and Travellers.

Museums, through their collections and how these are interpreted, can reconnect communities to their past, help orientate people who are new to an area and forge links between the two. They can also provide learning opportunities which engage people

Craft activity, community venue





Willow 'stories tree', Fenland Stories exhibition

who find more formal education routes difficult to access. The geography of the Fens also poses challenges to the museums located there which are often small with only a limited capacity to tackle problems on their own.

All these issues helped shape the aims of the partnership which are:

- To facilitate effective joint working through a sustainable partnership
- To engage with new audiences, particularly amongst target rural and demographic communities
- To improve access to museum services and collections for those living in isolated rural communities
- To promote excellence in the development of partnership projects including learning resources for audiences of all ages
- To develop the skills of staff and volunteers, and leadership within the partner museums.

The partnership currently consists of twenty Fenland museums ranging

from small volunteer-run sites at March and Chatteris to the larger local authority museums in Peterborough and King's Lynn. It is led by Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service and managed by a Renaissance-funded Fenland project officer. The area covered by the partnership crosses the county boundaries of Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire and the regional boundaries of East of England and East Midlands.

Since its formation, the GFMP has created the successful joint exhibitions and associated community activities which you can read about in this booklet. The partnership has continued to evolve with a growing amount of decision-making happening within the partnership. There's now a real sense of ownership by the partner museums and a firm belief that the GFMP is uniquely placed to deliver a comprehensive programme to people living in the Fens.

The *Feast of Fenland* exhibition



Fenland food tasting, community venue

The *Feast of Fenland* exhibition was the partnership's first joint project and toured the Fens in 2007-8. The theme of food was chosen because food production has always played such a large part in the life of the Fens. It was also a subject that would engage with local people and, it was hoped, encourage a sense of identity and pride in the area.

Two different versions of the travelling exhibition were created to enable venues of different sizes to take it. The "museum display" version included objects, graphic panels, and a popular interactive 'shopping trolley' for children. The "community venue" version was smaller and more flexible. The objects and images used in the project were mainly sourced from

GFMP museums. They were supplemented by specially commissioned photographs of contemporary farming practice.

An extensive range of outreach and educational activities accompanied the exhibition including:

- 8 community history days including sessions on healthy eating, object handling and Fenland remedies
- Cookery demonstrations
- Reminiscence days
- An oral history film made by three young travellers
- Craft activities for adults and children

No single museum could have put on such an ambitious programme:

- Over 14,000 people participated

either through visiting the exhibition, or taking part in outreach activities

- 38 venues hosted the exhibition, including 16 museum and heritage sites and 22 community sites
- Nearly 2,000 school children aged 5-18 participated in *Feast of Fenland* events
- 80 outreach events were run as part of the project engaging over 20 community groups

The project engaged particularly effectively with young people. New relationships were formed with local groups including teenagers who had their perceptions of museums and heritage challenged. Schools also embraced the opportunities offered by the project: Emneth Primary School, for instance, organised a Fenland History Week. Learning resources were developed including bespoke Fenland Learning Baskets for each partner

museum, a long-term resource that enables the delivery of focussed local sessions on the Fens.

In addition over 50 volunteers and staff attended skill-sharing and training days on a number of aspects including using reminiscence, marketing, learning, display and handling and packing.

For the museums, the project was seen as opening doors, both to new ways of working and to new audiences. For communities, feedback demonstrated it brought different generations together to talk and learn more about the history of the Fens. Many visitors commented on the importance of not forgetting and of learning from the recent past. Comments like these show that *Feast of Fenland* offered people an opportunity to discover more about their heritage, and that people are proud to live in Fenland.

“I cannot remember what happened to me yesterday, but you have helped me remember my childhood.” Participant in a reminiscence day for people with Alzheimer’s, Chatteris

“The children that attended... were completely captivated – the level of excitement was incredible. It was the first time they had ever taken part in such an event and it was superb.”

Group leader, Community House After School Club, Wisbech



Migrant workers, photography commission, Feast of Fenland exhibition

The *Fenland Stories* exhibition

Building on the success of *Feast of Fenland*, the partnership developed their next touring exhibition around the theme of *Fenland Stories*. The mysterious bogs and marshes of the Fens have always inspired tales of strange creatures and ghostly happenings, an engaging subject for adults and children alike.

This time the partnership involved the community in the actual production of the exhibition through working with different groups to create 13 films of Fenland narratives. These films are the centrepiece of the exhibition and are displayed via an interactive “story tree” in the form of a realistic replica willow. These short stumpy trees, some of which are hundreds of years old, line many of the dykes in the Fens.

Designed with access in mind

This method of showing the films was chosen as it provides a flexible display

solution: the tree is made up of self-contained units, which can be ‘split’ to allow even the smallest museum to take the exhibition. Accessibility has been a key factor in the design: the tree contains two audio-visual screens set at different heights for use by children and adults. External speakers hidden in the upper branches provide localised sound while two headphones allow the visitor to listen at a higher volume. Hearing loops on both half sections provide additional accessibility options. The tree also features small display cases and four feely holes for children hidden in the roots.

Community involvement

Fenland Stories aims to embed a sense of community ownership of the exhibition. Most of the old stories, such as *Tiddy Mun* and *The Dead Hand*, represent a collective community narrative which is part of a rich Fenland oral tradition.



Animation workshop for young people, Whittlesey



Left: 'Fenland Frighteners' workshop, summer activities programme

"The majority of the participants achieved their Cambridgeshire Youth Award and some even went on to get three Cambridgeshire Youth Awards, which means they get a locally recognised accreditation. A fantastic outcome." Julie Gunn, Locality Lead Youth Worker, Whittlesey

"I think it's good to get teenagers and children really interested in everything to see what museums can be about." Young person participant

To create the films, local museums worked in partnership with existing community groups. The Fenland Project Officer and a professional filmmaker supported the groups in turning their initial ideas into finished films.

Engaging young people

The majority of the community groups involved young people, some of whom had been diagnosed with ADHD and Aspergers, others of whom were NEET [not in education, employment or training].

Fenland Stories allowed young people to take ownership of the project, encouraging interest in the subject matter. They were given creative and directorial freedom, and developed skills and confidence through the filmmaking process. The project also

helped changed their perceptions of museums, an important step in engaging them as audiences in the future. Many of the young people also received recognised qualifications. As a result, participants felt more positive about themselves, their communities and gained skills which will prove valuable in gaining employment.

Outreach

It is estimated that by the end of the project over 160 outreach events will have taken place during the two years of the project with over 14,000 adults, children and young people engaging with partner museums. Outreach events range from the filmmaking and animation, an ESOL course, to two extensive summer outreach programmes in museums and community venues.

The benefits of working in partnership



The Greater Fens Museums Partnership has offered partner museums a new and valuable way of working. Initially, the partnership was driven by Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service – as the lead partner – but over time the partners have taken ownership of the network.

An example of this development is demonstrated by the way the second touring exhibition, *Fenland Stories*, was managed. A *Fenland Stories* Working Group was set up under the chairmanship of Ely Museum which enabled the partnership to take the lead on the exhibition and encouraged a more focussed decision-making process. Regular meetings of the full partnership allowed all museums to contribute to the plans.

Website

Another joint project has been the creation of the GFMP website: www.fensmuseums.org.uk. The website publicises partnership exhibitions and activities. It also contributes to the long-term sustainability of individual museums by allowing partners to upload information about their museum and events, and access new audiences.

Visitors to the site can also get involved, for example by adding their own stories to the *Fenland Stories* section of the site. A number of the exhibition films have been uploaded onto the site through YouTube – one film even found itself being displayed in a library window in America as an example of what young people can achieve.

Training and skills development

From the start GFMP has been active in developing a partner-led training programme. For example, a bespoke two-part museum governance training course was organised in response to partners' requests. This was delivered through the SHARE scheme, Renaissance East of England's innovative skills-sharing and training network, and was very well received. Partners have used SHARE to obtain valuable training in other areas including filmmaking, animation and marketing.

New audiences

The development of the touring exhibitions and the associated extensive outreach programmes have enabled partner museums to engage more of their local community. They have also reached new groups, such as teenagers, who are not traditional museum-goers. This in turn is building a more sustainable future for the museums involved.

By pooling resources, experience and expertise, GFMP provides an efficient model for the delivery of improved services to communities.

"We have benefited enormously from the opportunities, expertise and support offered by the Greater Fens Museum Partnership. This is an exciting time for us. We officially opened in 2004 in one room in Downham Town Hall. The Town Council has now offered us new premises suitable for our museum of social history. The partnership courses on marketing, packing and display training have been invaluable in helping us to plan our new premises and to prepare for the move. Equally important have been the meetings attended by various members where we have had the chance to meet representatives from other museums in the area and learn from their plans, difficulties and solutions. It's very helpful to talk through one's own problems with people who have already 'been there and done that'." Kathleen Wiseman, Downham Market & District Heritage Centre

**Far Left: Animation workshop for young people, *Fenland Stories* project, Whittlesey
Left: Photograph of child gleaners, courtesy of Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery**



Future plans

Although we live in uncertain times the GFMP is looking in a positive way to the future. The partnership is aiming to reduce its reliance on funding streams like Renaissance by actively seeking alternative external funding.

Meanwhile the next GFMP touring project is in the planning stages. Titled *Fenland Land and Lives* it will include up to five travelling exhibitions exploring the conflict and interdependence between people and their landscape environment. Following the model established by *Fenland Stories*, local museums will work with community groups and other organisations to create the exhibitions.

The project will be a true example of co-production, actively bringing local communities into the heart of the Fenland partnership.

Willow 'stories tree' listening post, *Fenland Stories* exhibition, Ramsey Rural Museum

Specifically, *Fenland Land and Lives* will aim to:

- Create and develop sustainable relationships with new and existing audiences
- Provide exciting training and opportunities for individuals to become active volunteers in museums
- Offer opportunities for individuals to engage with their local heritage while gaining new skills, confidence and accredited training
- Encourage the idea of communities becoming stakeholders in their local museum
- Continue to increase the sharing of resources and skills between all partner museums.

With each new project, GFMP develops its ability to offer community participation and ownership of local museums. The Fenland area may be made up of smaller communities, but the reach of the GFMP enables it to offer the kinds of opportunities which lie at the heart of the 'Big Society' concept.



Greater Fens Museums Partnership:

Cambridgeshire:

Cambridgeshire County Folk Museum
Chatteris Museum
Ely Museum
Farmland Museum and Denny Abbey
March and District Museum
Ramsey Rural Museum
St. Neot's Museum
Whittlesey Museum
Wisbech Castle
Wisbech and Fenland Museum

Lincolnshire:

Ayscoughfee Hall
Church Farm

Norfolk:

Downham Market & District Heritage
Centre
King's Lynn Museums
Tilney Fen End Pumping Museum

Peterborough:

Flag Fen Bronze Age Centre
Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery
Thorney Heritage Museum

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