

# The Guildford Museum Project and future of the Guildford Heritage Forum

Gavin Morgan, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2017

## 1 Purpose of this document

This document reviews the situation at Guildford Museum. It takes a look at the Council's [Review of Guildford Museum- Second report 19 April 2016](#) before asking some questions about where we are now. Finally, it proposes some ideas for how the Guildford Heritage Forum can move forward and make a positive contribution to heritage in the Guildford. I want to discuss these ideas at the next meeting of the Guildford Heritage Forum.

### Summary of Document

In case you don't have the energy to read the full document (and I wouldn't blame you) here is the summary.

Guildford Borough Council plans to revamp Guildford Museum and set out its plans in the "[Review of Guildford Museum- Second report 19 April 2016](#)". In short it wants to add a gallery with a café, revamp the displays to tell the story of Guildford and add an entrance from Castle Grounds. There are also talks with external partners such as the Carrollian Trust, which owns Lewis Carroll material.

However, it is now clear that this project is going to take much longer than original expected. The feasibility study into the building could take two years. Meanwhile the Museum is exploring how the public might wish to use the museum.

In the document below, I try to answer some basic questions about where the museum project is:

1. What is the plan?
2. What are the timelines for this project?
3. Will the community be involved?
4. How long should the revamp of the museum take?
5. How does the museum intend to identify relevant exhibits and acquire the necessary information to "tell the story of Guildford"?
6. Does the Heritage Team properly understand the museum's audience and the benefits heritage can bring to the town?

I then discuss some projects I think the Guildford Heritage Forum should pursue. These are all projects I can do with a bit of input from others. Your time at some meetings, to read documents or answer questions is what I really need. At the same time, I know you will have other ideas.

The projects I have planned are:

1. Debate importance of heritage to Guildford
2. Assess the Castle as a tourist attraction
3. Define the history of Guildford for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
4. Work with GBC over Heritage Weekend
5. Promotional Website
6. Build our heritage community

## 2 Background

18 months have passed since Guildford Borough Council's Executive accepted the recommendations of the "[Review of Guildford Museum- Second report 19 April 2016](#)". This was an excellent report and I hope it will be implemented. However, it is now clear that it is going to take much longer than originally expected. The building work was originally planned to start this autumn. Perhaps this was a bit over optimistic. An excellent architect was appointed and a feasibility study started. We heard in June at the Executive Meeting that the feasibility study could last 2 years. At the same time through an £87,000 Arts Council Funded project the museum has been interviewing members of the public and running some trial exhibitions to understand how the public might want to use the museum.

In my opinion the Guildford Heritage Forum must decide where it goes from here but I remain convinced that there should be a role for the public in this project. Indeed, if ever there ever was a project that needs to combine input from the community and from the Council then it is this one

- The Council owns a number of heritage sites, funds a heritage team, owns historical collections and works of art. However, the museum no longer employs specific local history experts in the way it used to.
- Much of the knowledge required to tell the story of Guildford and interpret the museum's collections now resides in the community. However, heritage groups in community do not have the resources to run the museum.

Above all Guildford Museum and all the heritage in public ownership needs to benefit everyone in the town. We need to define how this can be done.

## 3 Council's plans to update Guildford Museum

On 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016 Guildford Borough Council's Executive accepted the recommendations of the "[Review of Guildford Museum- Second report 19 April 2016](#)". The report stated that "Our museum offering falls short of current expectations of the type of offering and experience a modern museum should provide". Stuart Davis Associates were commissioned to write their own report. They spoke to people in the town and revealed that whilst there was some "appreciation of the artefacts, the museum is seen to be static and unchanging and tired. It offers poor access, is little known, has poor signage and is not family friendly".

The Council's report accepted there has been minimal investment in displays and facilities over the years. Visitor numbers declined from 17,689 in 2006-07 to a figure of around 12,986 visitors for 2015-16.

### 3.1 Proposed Improvements

The Council's report stated that "The new offering will tell the story of Guildford, using a wider range of display and interpretation methods, including interactive and digital technology (with appropriate budgets), with changing programmes to appeal to a broader audience. "

"An architect has produced some exciting draft plans that suggest an attractive, high quality new build extension to the current site."

"There will need to be a great deal of planning to ensure that we get this right. Incorporating the views of the public and partners will be vitally important. A development group will need to be assembled with appropriate individuals and representatives from relevant organisations "

“A funding strategy and related group will also need to be created to ensure we identify and secure appropriate external funding and grants.”

“There is potential to deliver a really exciting and modern museum for Guildford.”

### 3.2 Benefits to the town

A number of benefits were mentioned and these have been extracted:

- “Improved museum offering for Guildford.”
- “Increased numbers of visitors to the museum, to the town and borough.”
- “Stimulate and encourage learning about our past”.
- “It will also be a location and social centre for residents and visitors to meet and look at art and exhibits.”
- “Will add to the quality of life for residents and visitors and fits within the theme of Our Society within the Corporate Plan.”
- “The development of the museum would also meet the target under Our Borough within the Corporate Plan that states: ‘To produce proposals for the development of a new cultural and educational centre in the town centre taking into account the future of Guildford Museum’.”

## 4 Progress in the last 18 months

These are the main achievements:

- An architect ZMMA was appointed and started a feasibility study which is on-going and seems to be the focus of the project. Councillor Nelson-Smith told the executive on 27<sup>th</sup> June that this could take up to 2 years.
- A Specialists Group met four times between November 2016 and February 2017 to talk about Guildford Stories. It produced a list of stories but more work needs to be done to see which stories would work in a museum context and can be illustrated with objects. Some might be better for other media such as books, talks or video clips.
- An £87,000 Arts Council Grant resulted in “Your Stories, Your Museum” which is speaking to general members of the public about what makes Guildford special. It has allowed funding for two staff, Melanie and Di, who are doing excellent work. Over 1000 people have been interviewed and they are using the information to understand how people might want to use the museum
- There have been more exhibitions. Most were hired in and many were not directly relevant to Guildford. Others were used to display items in store and were a delight. “Stories in Stitch” produced items from the needle work collections and “Take a closer look” offered a look at items from the store. Some have been funded with the Arts Council money and have allowed the museum to test ideas. These include “Medieval Machines” and some new testing exhibits in the old SyAS library (now called the Discovery Lounge)

## 5 Status of project

### 5.1 What is the plan?

We have been told that the Heritage Team are working on the plan and it will take some time to complete. Obviously, the report of 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016 outlined high level objectives which I have pulled together in the section on the report above. We presume these are still the high-

level plan. We do not know if the Council has gone into any more detail by writing a more detailed set of requirements, with objectives, risks etc.

## 5.2 What are the timelines for this project?

The Report approved on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2016 had an [Action plan](#) with a start date for the building work of Sept 2017. However, Councillor Nelson-Smith told the executive on 27<sup>th</sup> June that feasibility study (the initial assessment) could take up to 2 years. The work being carried out for “Your Stories, Your Museum” continues until April 2018 so the full report into that will presumably not be ready until then.

All we know, therefore, is that this project will take a long time. It would be helpful if the Council had a target in mind but we don’t know whether it is nearer 5 years, 10 years or 15 years. The improvements to the Castle which opened in 2004 (i.e. the first floor and exhibition) were first discussed in 1990. At the moment we get the impression this project will take as long as it will take.

## 5.3 Will the community be involved?

It depends on what you mean by involvement.

- The public are being “consulted” in that they are being asked specific questions and being invited to give answers through “Your Stories, Your Museum”.
- They can also get “involved” by trying out the test exhibits in the Discovery Lounge.
- The Access Officer is working with David Rose’s “Men’s Group” to create a community exhibition.
- The Friends of the Museum provide valuable support and meet with the Heritage Team
- I meet with the Council regularly to share ideas and get updates

However, the report also stated “There will need to be a great deal of planning to ensure that we get this right. Incorporating the views of the public and partners will be vitally important. A development group will need to be assembled with appropriate individuals and representatives from relevant organisations”. The Development Group was going to be set up in April 2016, was mentioned again in the Press Release of October 2016 but has still not appeared. So, it does not appear that involvement in the form of co-operation and exchange of ideas leading to joint actions is happening to the extent some of us feel it should.

## 5.4 How long should the revamp of the museum take?

This is hard to say but certainly the current pace of the project is hard for outsiders to understand. There are certain obvious reasons for delays

- **Staff availability:** The Heritage Team Managers and Councillors have multiple responsibilities and are not just working on this project. On the other hand, there clearly seems to be enough money available to this project to pay for an external project manager to keep things moving
- **Discussions with English Heritage:** The site is complex with listed buildings, scheduled monuments and possibly some archaeology. However, ZMMA worked on the lottery bid up to 2014 and spoke to English Heritage, and archaeological test digs were carried out in the 1990s. So presumably we do not have to start from scratch.

- **Assessments:** Clearly it takes time to assess what the public want. However, this work is already taking place and there have been many similar projects in the past.
- **Research and Fundraising:** There are other tasks but they don't have to wait in a queue. Hopefully we can all work together and ensure that if some areas are held up others can move forward.

### 5.5 How does the museum intend to identify relevant exhibits and acquire the necessary information to “tell the story of Guildford”?

If the output of the museum over the last few years is anything to go by the museum does not appear able to “tell the story of Guildford” or “stimulate and encourage learning about our past” (to use the words of the Council’s report). This is not intended as a criticism. The Council no longer employs local historians or collections experts to run its museum. It seems that the local history knowledge staff have is a by-product of their work or gained outside it. Also, they have not been in post as long as the curators who retired over the last 10 years.

By contrast there are many groups and individuals in the community with the required knowledge. The Specialists Group provided a vehicle for gathering information but it has not met since February. Maybe this is an area where the Guildford Heritage Forum can help with? See below.

### 5.6 Does the Heritage Team properly understand the museum’s audience and the benefits heritage can bring to the town?

The Arts Council funded project called “Your Stories, Your Museum” is doing great work (see above). In the past the museum has run similar projects and this was documented in the lottery bid. However, in the summer the Council produced a [Public Art Strategy Consultation Document](#). It identified the benefits of public art to Guildford and included:

- **Quality** – enhancing the physical and visual quality of an environment and the experience of those using it
- **Distinctiveness** - contributing to the creation of a unique identity for a place through work that is original and site specific
- **Sense of place** – reflecting and interpreting key local references such as heritage, landscape, site uses and local population
- **Engagement** – creating a sense of community and civic pride through involving residents and other stakeholders both in the process and the outcomes
- **Profile** – putting Guildford ‘on the map’ nationally and internationally through ambitious commissioning programmes

These points could almost all be transferred to a heritage policy. Does one exist? If not, then this is something we should address as it will help give focus to what the museum is trying to achieve.

It is also worth mentioning the [Stoke Park consultation](#). This is thorough piece of work and it would be great if a similar exercise could be carried out for the museum and Castle Grounds.

## 6 The Future of the Guildford Heritage Forum

Where does this leave the Guildford Heritage Forum? We originally came together when the museum was under threat and established a community of very useful and knowledgeable people. Some are experts in museum studies or local history. Others are experts in their communities and can help define what sort of heritage service Guildford needs. I hope the Council will make use of these people.

However, there is more to Guildford's heritage than the museum. I would like us to take a broader interest in our local heritage and I hope that many of our projects will be of use to the Council when it eventually ready. I am interested in projects that will promote heritage and bring people together and propose the following. These are all projects that I can complete with advice from other members of the forum. However, forum members have lots of ideas and we can discuss those as well.

### 6.1 Debate importance of heritage to Guildford

We should encourage a debate about how heritage benefits Guildford and define it in a document along the lines of the Council's Arts Policy. Defining the value of heritage will obviously help us focus on activities that make a difference to the town. The Council may already be doing work along these lines and if so it would be good to work with it. The Guildford Society also has a lot of experience in this area and will be a useful partner.

### 6.2 Assess the Castle as a tourist attraction

The castle is arguably Guildford's most high-profile visitor attraction. The exhibitions put in over 10 years ago are great but there is potential to that the visitor experience further. The museum has experimented with new ideas through "Medieval Machines". I wish to explore this in more detail with the experts we have on the forum and hope museum staff will be interested in working with us.

### 6.3 Define the history of Guildford for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Every generation has to define its story. For many people the best attempt to interpret the Guildford story is E.R. Chamberlin's "Guildford: A Biography" and his subsequent versions of it. Published in 1970 it saw Guildford as a commuter town but the growth of the university means we need a modern perspective.

### 6.4 Work with GBC over Heritage Weekend

Heritage Weekend is a great showcase for heritage in the town. It is a great example of how the town and the community work together. Groups such as the Friends of the Museum, Town Guides and the Guildford Society are already heavily involved and it will be interesting to see if we can develop it further to promote more of the good work that goes in our town around heritage.

### 6.5 Promotional Website

The museum is running a lot of good projects that people are probably not aware of. There are other projects run by the Guildford Society, SyAS and the Council. We need to find a way of promoting what goes on as this will help build the support base for the museum and heritage in general. One possibility is Facebook (or possibly a moderated discussion forum). Everyone seems to have their own sites but a central site might be helpful.

## 6.6 Build our heritage community

The museum has clearly built up a lot of good contacts through “Your Stories, Your Museum”. Collectively, through the museum and all the heritage groups we can reach out to a wide cross section of the community. I want to build up the membership of the forum to act as a channel to publicise heritage projects in the town and would be delighted to work with the museum over this.