

**Friends
of the**



Registered Charity
No 288042

Newsletter of the Friends of the Suffolk Record Office

March 2012

Chairman's Letter

I hope all Friends will have taken the opportunity to respond to the County Council's consultation about the future of the Record Office in relation to the new Heritage organisation. The committee members also individually completed the consultation but we felt that we should send a formal response from the Friends as the premier representative user group. So, in addition, committee members sent comments to Mrs Betty Milburn, our Vice Chairman who collated them, and after discussion with me we submitted this formally to the Council. Inevitably it doesn't cover all nuances that were raised but it is we hope a fair summary of our committee members' views. We thought that you ought to see what we had written on your behalf. We shall be represented at the Scrutiny Committee being held on the 8 March along with other Suffolk heritage organisations. These are challenging times and we need to protect our wonderful resource.

The committee was sad to hear of the death of John Gibbs. John was elected Membership Secretary in 1985, on his retirement from the Suffolk Record Office. He held the post until 2010. Representatives from the Friends and the Record Office attended his memorial service at Kesgrave Parish Church.

Paul Simmons

FOSRO's response to the Consultation

Membership of the **Friends of the Suffolk Record Office** consists of over 200 users, depositors and volunteers. We have taken a keen interest in the proposals set out in the consultation document and, despite some reservations, are supportive of the creation of a new heritage organisation as described. We see merit in developing plans for a unified heritage centre for Suffolk's archives, archaeological finds and artefacts if this can be achieved without losing access at a local level.

Last year we defined **our core values and aims** in relation to any new organisation in the following terms:

We would wish any new agency to protect, preserve and catalogue in a professional manner, in accordance with relevant quality standards, the rich archives of the county for the benefit of this and future generations.

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To achieve the above it would be necessary to

- Maintain an appropriate level of suitably trained staff, including professionally trained archivists
- Provide access to local records at a location that is convenient for researchers in a safe and comfortable environment
- Assist, equally, professional, amateur, local and family historians in their work
- Encourage a wider interest in Suffolk history, enhancing the sense of cultural identity by promoting the archive resource

We believe the creation of a new management structure should encourage the enhancement of all these basic aims. It should build on the excellent service currently provided and use the opportunity to improve the range and quality in a substantial way. This will require an appropriate number of professionally qualified staff, with time to deliver the current service, develop new initiatives and to continue the training and supervision of the impressive army of volunteers who have become a valuable asset to the Suffolk Record Office.

Any future arrangements of services within the county should be underwritten by the principle of equal access for all Suffolk residents, without incurring excessive transport costs. Given that efficient archive storage demands a high volume of records consolidated in centralised sites, (whether this be one, two or three) then we believe the answer lies in the concept of local access points, using digital or other copies of materials, or in a highly developed on-line service delivered to the home or through such access points.

The cost and scope of digitisation required should be carefully addressed in the business plan, and not seen as a matter for later consideration. We recognise that it is neither practical nor desirable to make digital copies of the entire contents of the Record Office, but strongly believe that any costing should be based on a thorough analysis of need and demand in terms of the type and range of materials which might be appropriately delivered in this way. Plans should include a realistic timescale for delivery. Equally, any plans for a new main heritage centre should consider, from the beginning, the role and location of local access points. These could play a valuable role in maintaining close links with local communities whilst providing information about collections and facilities available at the centre.

Our concerns centre mainly on the question of accountability. Suffolk County Council has the statutory responsibility for the care and custodianship of County archives. If any new organisation is to take on the management of that responsibility, it is vital that the Council should retain, at both officer and member level, the resources, knowledge and skills by which it can regularly monitor and access the quality of provision. The frame work for monitoring needs to be open and transparent, and we would welcome the introduction of a system that gives some ownership to users and depositors.

Finally, we believe it is important to include an 'exit strategy' that provides the ability to rescind, with proper notice, the agreement for the delivery of the service, in the event of the new organisation failing to achieve its objectives. This should take account of both the rights of the thousands of owners of records held on deposit, and the continuing responsibility of Suffolk County Council.

FOSRO welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation process, and would be pleased to contribute to any further discussion on these important proposals.

Paul Simmons, Chairman Betty Milburn, Vice-Chairman



Suffolk Record Office Update

Starters and Leavers

Since the last newsletter we have welcomed two new members of staff. Gemma Pardue started work as a Searchroom Assistant at the Ipswich branch in November, while Helen Band joined the Lowestoft team in December.

In April we will be saying goodbye to Bill Wexler, the archivist at the Lowestoft branch. Bill started working at the Ipswich branch in October 1989 before moving to Lowestoft in 1996. Many of the friends will remember him from his days as FOSRO Secretary from 1996 to 2004.

Outreach

Since September the record office has run 36 workshops, 17 talks, 18 5 and 10 week courses and 27 evening visits, fairs and Top Time talks, with an overall total of 3,632 people attending events. Full details of our Spring and Summer programme can be found on our website: www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro

Website

In the last newsletter we mentioned that the County Council was hoping to launch a new website at the end of 2011. The new website is now live in a beta stage and can be found at <http://beta.suffolk.gov.uk>. We are continuing to work on the record office pages and would welcome any feedback, either directly or by using the feedback option on the website itself.

Buildings

After a prolonged period of work at the Bury office we are pleased to announce that the work needed to separate the building from the Shire Hall site has now been completed. We are hoping to start work this year on a shelving project at the Ipswich Record Office. This will see an increase in the amount of strongroom space and will involve a relocation of some local studies material to lockable shelving elsewhere in the building. Inevitably there will be some disruption to the running of the service but we will endeavour to keep it to a minimum and ensure that users are notified of forthcoming work wherever possible.

Purchase of Documents

A full report of documents purchased by the Friends will be included in the August newsletter.

A new heritage organisation for Suffolk public consultation

Suffolk County Council has now closed the consultation on the future of its Heritage services. Between Mid-November 2011 and the end of January 2012 862 responses were received from partner and stakeholder organisations, depositors and owners, volunteers, staff and the general public. Suffolk Record Office and Archaeological Services Managers were delighted so many people completed the online and paper questionnaires or sent in letters and would like to thank everyone for their support.

These responses are being analysed by the County Council's Business Development Unit. They have reported that "there appears to be a high degree of appreciation and understanding of the county council's archaeology and archive services and the issues they face. This is particularly evident in the free text responses to the questions, which are well focused and in many cases very well informed." Information will be produced for the Council's Scrutiny Committee meeting on 8th March and the Cabinet Meeting in April.



Suffolk Record Office Contact Details

For any queries or comments about the Friends please contact the secretary or treasurer at the following address:.

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Website address: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>
One-stop gateway to Suffolk Record Office's catalogues and Suffolk's heritage collections -
www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk

Update on Suffolk's Manorial Documents Register Project

The MDR project is now halfway through and is progressing well. 724 Suffolk manors are now considered 'proven' according to the MDR rules. 655 manor names still remain doubtful, but it is estimated that the final number of confirmed Suffolk manors could be well over 1000 by the end of the project.

Since September the MDR project officer, with volunteer assistance, has been working through the large family and estate collections held at Ipswich Record Office, finding a significant quantity of records not recorded on the original MDR. To date, over 4000 entries for documents have been added to the MDR database. However, this figure represents only 19% of entries originally on the MDR. At the current rate of progress this would make the Suffolk project one of the largest to be undertaken by the MDR.

Due to the fact that the project is more extensive than was hitherto anticipated, The National Archives have provided a further grant to extend the project into 2013.

Gemma Field
Manorial Documents Register Project Officer

Membership and Subscriptions

Members are reminded that subscriptions fall due each year on 1st January. The minimum subscription is £12 for Individual/Family membership and £20 for Corporate membership. Cheques should be made payable to the *Friends of the Suffolk Record Office* and sent to the Secretary at the Bury St Edmunds branch.