

**Report on the creation of the new exhibition of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology  
at The Oxfordshire Museum, Woodstock, Oxfordshire**



**Oxfordshire Museums Service 2017**

## Aim

To create a new exhibition for long-term display at Oxfordshire's county museum. The exhibition was to reflect the county's Anglo-Saxon archaeology, using material from the county collection. The display would also be used to support schools learning programmes, and be suitable for this purpose.

## Process

Funding was sought from a variety of sources, including the Friends of the Oxfordshire Museum, national grant giving bodies and county historical and archaeological societies. Money from the museum's donation boxes was also allocated to the project. The Museum Service contributed staff time to research and installed the exhibition. The total available to spend was approximately £45,000, although as some of these funds were made available some time into the project budgeting was an ongoing process, and plans were altered slightly as more funds became available.

Curatorial staff began by identifying strengths and weaknesses in the county collection, and relating the material to the written histories of the Anglo-Saxon period in the county. With an outline plan, advice was sought from experts in the period from the University of Oxford. Curatorial staff were then able to identify some of the themes of the exhibition in consultation with colleagues from the Service's learning and access team, and start to produce object lists. Meanwhile, technical staff produced a draft floorplan for the exhibition based on available space and the planned refurbishment and use of existing exhibition equipment where possible.

Once object lists had been produced, conservation staff were able to begin work to ensure all the items intended for display were in suitable condition. This proved particularly challenging in the case of the Lowbury Hill burial, a complete 'watcher' type Anglo-Saxon warrior burial, which was to be displayed with grave goods. The skeleton, which had been excavated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, had been subject to many now out-dated conservation practices, and several months' work were required to restore its condition appropriate for display.

After the initial conservation assessment, final object lists were produced; both label and panel text written, and a designer with specialist museum experience engaged. Existing museum cases were refurbished for use in the exhibition, and one new case (for the Lowbury Hill display) was commissioned. Interactive activities, reproduction objects and reconstruction artwork was also commissioned for the final gallery.

## Result

The resulting gallery extends to 8 cases of archaeological material:

- *The end of Roman Britain/Saucer brooches*

Covering the transition from late Roman Britain to the early Anglo-Saxon period, looking at objects which show both continuity and change during this time.

The display of saucer brooches focuses on how different designs on the brooches may be related to regional, tribal or familial associations.



- *Death and burial*

Focussing on pagan Anglo-Saxon burial traditions, from which a great deal of our collection comes. Typical grave goods for both female and male burials are on display, along with reconstructed items, such as a pattern welded sword, which demonstrates the quality of Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship.

- *The West Hanney burial grave goods*

This well-studied and significant seventh century burial of a high-status woman at West Hanney produced an assemblage of grave goods including the spectacular Hanney Brooch. Whilst the skeleton is too fragile to display, the grave goods have a case of their own with text panels to explain the significance of the items.



- *The Lowbury Hill burial*

This high-status 'watcher' type grave was excavated in the early twentieth century and has been little studied. Recent attempts to rectify this situation have made the burial even more interesting, with unexpected results from isotope analysis of the teeth, showing a strong likelihood that the Lowbury man came from west Cornwall. Here the skeleton and grave goods are laid out as they were when he was buried in the second half of the seventh century.

- *The Watchfield scales and runic inscription*

The early Anglo-Saxon scales and weights are thought to have been used by a trader or a mercenary to weigh out small amounts of gold or silver as payment. The scales were kept in a textile bag with a bronze fastening inscribed with some of the earliest known forms of English rune, which have attracted international interest. The inscription is simple and sentimental- 'To Heribok from Wusa'.



- *Everyday life (clothes and diet)*

This case represents aspects of daily life, covering clothing, footwear, weaving and jewellery; also food and diet, using some of the latest research undertaken by the University of Cardiff using the Oxfordshire Museums Service collection. Examples of original and reconstructed material are on display, including herbs and dyed wool, giving a vivid impression of the world in which the Anglo-Saxons lived.



- *Late Anglo-Saxon period and monasticism*

Monasticism began early in Oxfordshire, with Eynsham and Dorchester abbeys both being established in the seventh century. This case displays material that shows both the faith and the diversity of the religious communities, and represents the importance of the abbeys and learning in the establishment of administrative kingdoms of characters such as Alfred the Great and Aethelred, the first king of a united England.

- *Anglo-Saxon crafts*

The craftsmen of the Anglo-Saxon period were extraordinarily skilled, and this case showcases some of the crafts they practised, using both original artefacts and reconstructions, such as a ceremonial yew bucket.

The gallery also features speculative reconstruction paintings of the great hall at Sutton Courtenay and the Northgate of the City of Oxford, a commissioned map of saucer brooch distribution around the county. Reconstructions of a pattern welded sword; the unique Lowbury Hill spear head; a ceremonial yew bucket; also brooches and costume and examples of naturally dyed wool add another layer of interpretation and help to emphasise the skills of the craftsman of the period. The gallery also contains an interactive activity based on writing in runes to engage children as well as the wider public.



## **Impact of the Exhibition**

### *What has changed?*

The development of the new exhibition has not only used some redundant space, but effectively refreshed the entire museum. It has allowed visitors, staff and patrons to see that the museum service is a progressive and capable organisation that is able to deliver a quality museum experience for a relatively low cost.

### *Wider effects on the Museum service*

The new exhibition has boosted the museum's visitor numbers and also generated a buzz of excitement amongst visitors, volunteers and staff. It has served to help energise the entire museum, and give staff a sense of confidence and optimism about further new developments within the museum.

'I feel the opening gave the museum and us all a boost and there was a real buzz about the place. It is definitely something we can feel proud of at The Oxfordshire Museum.' *Davina Chapman, Events Activities Assistant*

'This is an excellent example of what can be done to redisplay galleries and help to attract to the Museum new and long established visitors when funds are available. It is a very worthwhile use of the funds contributed by the Friends of The Oxfordshire Museum towards the costs and towards attracting financial support from elsewhere.' *Trevor Hendy, Volunteer, and ex-chair of Friends of the Oxfordshire Museum.*

'The Anglo-Saxon gallery was a big boost to the museum with a lot of people coming in and asking about it...It is great to have another complete "grown up" space in which adults (and adolescents) can enjoy.' *Augusta Maclean, Visitor Assistant*

I am delighted that, despite considerable reductions in the revenue budget for the Museums Service, with the support of the HLF, our Friends and other supporters it has been possible to create a

stunning new gallery which provides access to a significant collection of archaeological material and enables us to share the stories it has to tell about this formative period in the history of both Oxfordshire and England.

The new gallery, the first for a number of years, takes full advantage of new display techniques and improved lighting to present a bright, colourful and accessible display. Supported by a wealth of new research the exhibition's curator has very successfully presented new and intriguing stories in a way that very effectively engages the visitor's interest.

The creation of the new Gallery has also forged a number of new partnerships and cemented existing ones. It has given both Friends, volunteers and staff, something they can feel proud of. This especially important at a time when so many museum services are under threat.

*Carol Anderson, Oxfordshire Museum Service Manager*

#### *Training opportunities for intern, work experience placement and volunteers*

In total, four volunteers were involved in the creation of the new exhibition, all of whom gained experience in several areas of museum work which they did not previously have, such as use of the database and object handling. One student from the University of Oxford completed a month-long work experience placement which satisfied a requirement for her degree in Archaeology and Anthropology. The project also employed a paid intern for six months, who was studying for a master's degree in Conservation of Cultural Heritage. The intern worked on conservation and installation of artefacts and human remains in preparation for the exhibition.

'I learnt a lot about how an exhibition is put together and new skills ...photography, handling objects, museum systems for storage...finding objects on the database and in the store and packing them' 'it has greatly helped me with my Certificate in Archaeology...read about spindle whorls, loomweights, brooches, pottery etc but to actually handle such objects really added understanding to what I was studying' *Rosemary Dearden, Volunteer*

'It taught me that a willingness to get involved in a variety of tasks is essential when working in today's museum environment'

'My organisational and time management skills were developed. I had to balance carrying out a number of tasks throughout my internship. It got me used to how conservation within a museum environment exists today. I wouldn't have been able to learn this at university so having a 'real world' experience behind me is great.'

'I gained a thorough understanding into the ethical practice surrounding the treatment of human remains.'

'I don't think I would have had such a fulfilling experience if I had just been based at university for the duration of my MA. Combining it with this project really has been worthwhile!'

'I recently went for an interview at the Highland Folk Museum where my involvement in this project provided me with many talking points during my interview. They were able to see how I had worked independently and collaboratively on this project, and it stood me in good stead for fulfilling their job description. Although I was unsuccessful in getting the position, they gave me some very positive feedback. This has been encouraging when seeking further employment.'

*Rebecca Plumbe, Conservation Intern*

#### *Conservation*

During the project 35 objects were conserved and approximately 50 objects had purpose made mounts to support them during display resulting in the improved long term preservation of these artefacts. The exhibition, conservation and mounting has also increased the accessibility of the artefacts to the public and enhanced their historical interpretation.

The largest project undertaken was to reverse previous consolidation treatment on the skeleton from Lowbury Hill. Polyvinyl alcohol had been used on the skeleton at least 30 years ago, this had shrunk and peeled, damaging the underlying bone and giving the skeleton a plastic-like appearance. There were also other techniques that needed reviewing, such as the use of twisted wire and internal supports with wood.

The bulk of the conservation work, other than preservation of the skeleton, was to stabilise active iron corrosion on ferrous objects which are notoriously unstable from this period in history. This corrosion was not possible to stabilise with environmental controls alone, meaning the objects had to

be treated chemically. Several copper alloy objects made from very fine, thin metal foil were also actively corroding, treatment of which required mechanical removal of corrosion product and stabilisation with chemicals and lacquers. In some cases objects with separating and the fragments required treatment involving adherents and colour-matching infill.

Two leather shoes required humidification to relax the leather. One of the shoes needed to be completely transformed from a flat disfigured group of leather fragments, which were fragile, brittle, cracking and heavily saturated in leather dressing, to resemble a shoe in shape, requiring specialist mounting. After conservation and mounting it is now a more robust and stable object, representing the shoe it once was.

The Conservation mounts are designed to support the most fragile objects in the exhibition safely and to aid interpretation. All mounts were made from conservation grade materials and were either produced in house or by Dauphin Acrylic Design.

#### *Documentation*

Upwards of 330 object records have been improved, with those objects being audited and their database records enhanced with further details including conservation notes and photographs. Several objects which had previously been unidentified or 'lost' in the store were found, identified and marked with their accession number.

#### *Original research*

Part of the development in the gallery involved original research by museum staff which has been presented to the public as part of the interpretation. This includes collation of the current knowledge of the Lowbury Hill burial and work on the distribution of different styles of saucer brooch. Other research, based on the museum collections which are on display, carried out by academics from as far afield as Cardiff and Munich has been included in the exhibition prior to publication. This covers aspects of the early medieval diet and translation of runic inscription.

#### *How local businesses have been affected*

Development of the exhibition made use of several local businesses, favouring these over big nationals, and so has contributed to the local economy. Examples include graphic design, blacksmithing, mount-making, cartography, construction and refurbishment of cases and artwork. It has also allowed the museum service to develop new relationships with local businesses and craftsmen which will lead to new projects and opportunities. For example, the jeweller who worked on the enamelling for our reconstruction spear is now planning to collaborate with the museum on some experimental archaeological work to better determine the methods used in the enamelling of the original spear.



## Visitors

### Schools



For the first six weeks of opening, the exhibition displayed the Watlington Hoard, which was on loan from the Ashmolean Museum. The Hoard is believed to be 'weregild' - tribute money paid to Viking invaders, and featured several coins which were previously considered very rare. These have allowed historians to re-write the history of the relationship between King Alfred of Wessex and Ceowulf of Mercia. The presence of the coin hoard, and funding which came with it, allowed several educational sessions to be run for local schools at no charge.

#### *Quotes from teacher evaluation*

Really well organised. Excellently prepared and delivered. Activities gave a 'fun' context to learn more about history. They [pupils] were discussing what they had seen on their way back and asking each other questions – definitely sparked their interest.

The Gallery activities were spot on. The workshop at the beginning was especially fun – all engaged! Seeing the hoard has increased curiosity and they want to visit the museum at the weekends. Excellent!

The children enjoyed exploring the gallery and the choice of completing the activity cards or looking around was good. The re-enactment was very useful to the children and me as next term we are learning about the Vikings. The artefact task made our class work on artefacts real because this time they could see the artefacts they were exploring.

The children have learnt to really appreciate artefacts in museums.

We had a very enjoyable and educational morning and children have expressed how much they loved the trip. In the afternoon we designed our own Anglo-Saxon exhibitions and it became evident how much they had learned in the morning. As a teacher, it improved my understanding of the Saxons & Vikings as well.



The re-enactment was brilliant! It helped the children to secure their understanding and bring it to life. Artefact activity encouraged thinking skills.

The children really enjoyed the role-play – it was useful as the changes are quite complicated.

#### *Quotes from pupil comments*

*Q. what did you find most interesting about your visit to the museum*

- The skeleton. I found it fascinating and was amazed how much you can find out just from the teeth!
- I found the archaeology most interesting because of how well it's preserved, you can see it clearly.
- What I found interesting was the skeleton because it was really annoying me because I didn't know how he died.
- How Wessex fought the Vikings



- The amount of info on the jewellery and weapons
- I liked it when we went to see the artefacts because there was a skeleton of a man who had been rich.
- I liked the sword that they made a copy of because the patterns were very cool.
- I liked all the things that you never see every day such as the skeleton, old pottery, different technology.
- I liked the spear head because it had lots of colours on it.
- I liked the skeleton because of the way he died. He died from bone disease. He had a hole in the bone on his right arm.
- The most interesting was the rusty sword
- That we saw the real life Anglo-Saxon coins

*Q. Do you think it is important for museums to collect things like the hoard? Why/why not?*

- I think it's important because people can look back to history before their eyes and see just how far we've come in the space of a few centuries; it makes people appreciate what they have.
- I think it's important because these objects teach us so much about our history and we couldn't find this out if the objects were left to be destroyed.
- I think they should because then people can come and visit exciting artefacts
- I think it is because otherwise they get lost, destroyed and changed but if museums get them they keep them so other people can see them as they were.
- I think it is because it can be inspiring to people and educate children.
- I think it's important to collect things like the hoard to give people information and give the people evidence to tell the truth

*General public*



- I visited the new Anglo Saxon gallery. It was so beautifully displayed. Lovely to find in our local museum. Well done! Thank you
- I visited the Anglo-Saxon exhibition today...wonderful, well done. It was also good to see so many children with parents and grandparents enjoying the experience.
- Dear OMS. I spent a very enjoyable day exploring your new Anglo-Saxon gallery recently. You have done a great job there. I was particularly intrigued by new research surrounding the Lowbury Hill warrior. Have details of the "scientific analysis of his skeleton" been published yet? If not, are you able to possibly give a brief summary of the tests that showed the very exciting Cornish origin results? Many thanks



- We thoroughly enjoyed our visit. The icing on the cake was the Watlington Hoard, but the other exhibits were also very interesting. They are well displayed and have good labelling.
- An excellent and well-labelled exhibition with some really exciting exhibits. Lowbury a high-spot!
- Excellent and well-designed exhibition
- Thrilling and instructive. A privilege to see
- Wonderful collection. The Hanney Broach is beautiful. The skeleton is amazing with a great story of its history
- Well done. Some of the smaller objects, like belt buckles and the glass beads, show these were real people
- Wonderful to see the Watlington Hoard so well laid-out
- This is a wonderfully displayed collection of Anglo- Saxon pieces. Thank you; it is rare to see reminders of this era

The development of the gallery has also lead to one You Tube film to be filmed and posted, which has gained over 100 viewings, with another currently in production. The museum's You Tube channel is very new, and was set up at the same time as the exhibition was being developed, so is in its infancy, We hope as it becomes better known the films will get more viewings.

#### *Academic*

The Anglo-Saxon exhibition is simply excellent. It showcases your exceptional collections to their very best advantage, looks fantastic despite the small space, and above all, people can actually LEARN from it. Really, it's a triumph and a fitting tribute to all the hard work that went into it. Well done to the whole team!

*Professor Helena Hamerow FSA (Professor of Early Medieval Archaeology, University of Oxford)*

I wanted to see the exhibition with the Watlington Hoard in place, indeed far better displayed than in the Ashmolean. I thought I should email to say how splendidly everything was displayed. I have long been impressed with the display in the Roman gallery and in a way this is even better, and one was not overpowered by explanations. I don't think I have actually seen the Lowbury Hill spearhead before, but the Cornish connection is amazing and very interesting indeed.

I loved the display of circular brooches....which speak powerfully to me of the transformation of artistic styles in Late Antiquity....Anyway this is a real winner.

*Revd Professor Martin Henig MA, DPhil, DLitt, FSA (Professor of Classics, University of Oxford)*

I was bowled over! The display (arrangement, lighting and so on) is beautiful, and the material is shown to extremely good effect: indeed, I can't see how it could have been done better. And it was nice to encounter some old friends, as well as one or two surprises!

*Professor John Blair FSA FBA (Professor of Medieval History and Archaeology, University of Oxford)*

*Visitor numbers, 14 Feb to the end of June 2016 and 2017:*

Total visitors for the period Feb-June 2016- 46,569

Total visitors for the period Feb-June 2017- 47,260

Increase of 691

Unique visitors to Museum's website increased significantly and visits to the exhibitions page almost tripled when the exhibition opened in February. The museum had over 750 visitors on the opening day.

Gender	2016	2017
Male	35.22	36.47
Female	57.23	55.29
Prefer not to say	7.55	8.24

Do you live in the UK?	2016	2017
Yes	89.74	86.9
No	5.13	10.71
Prefer not to say	5.13	2.38

Age	2016	2017
Under 16	23.9	24.71
16-24	1.89	5.88
25-34	5.03	5.88
35-44	8.81	18.82
45-54	15.09	9.41

Who did you visit with today?	2016	2017
Alone	11.39	14.29
With children	15.82	29.76
With friends/family	60.76	48.81
As part of an organised group	0.63	0
Other	11.39	7.14

Ethnic group	2016	2017
White	80.5	79.76
Black or Black British	2.52	1.19
Mixed	1.89	0

Do you have a disability?	2016	2017
Yes	6.54	11.9
No	88.89	83.33
Prefer not to say	4.58	4.76

How would you describe your disability:	2016	2017
Mobility difficulty	30	40
Learning difficulty	10	30
Hearing difficulty	20	0

	2016	2017
Visual difficulty	0	10
Other	20	10
Prefer not to say	20	100

This shows a significant increases in 16-24 (+4%) and 35-44 (+10%) age groups, of visitors who brought their children (+14%) non-UK residents (+5%) and those with a disability (+5%). There were fewer visitors in the 45-54 age group (-5%), and fewer came with friends/family (-12%), although some of this reduction may be offset by the increase in the numbers of visitors with children. This would suggest that the introduction of the new Anglo-Saxon exhibition has impacted on the visitor profile of the museum, attracting more teenagers and young adults (a notoriously hard to reach museum audience) and more young families (parents in the 35-44 age bracket visiting with children).

## Summary

- The Anglo-Saxon exhibition has now been open for five months and attracted positive responses from the general public, schools and academics.
- The exhibition includes previously unpublished research.
- Preparations for the exhibition allowed a great deal of conservation work to be carried out on the collections.
- Development of the exhibition contributed to the local economy by using local businesses, and forged productive new partnerships between the museum and local craftsmen.
- Exhibition of the Watlington Hoard for the first six weeks of the exhibition received very positive feedback, and favourable comparison to its display at the Ashmolean.
- The new exhibition is a definite asset to the museum, and an important new attraction helping the service to continue to meet and often exceed visitor expectations.

