



What of the Future?

by Current Chairman, Trevor Davies

When she asked me to write this article, the editor Christine Bury thoughtfully provided the similar article my predecessor, Gerry Williams, wrote for the 30th Anniversary edition of the *Emsworth Echo* in 2005. It makes interesting reading – some issues have not changed; others have changed out of all recognition.

In his article 20 years ago, Gerry, included a nod towards changing technology. I doubt that he would have realised quite how much the Museum depends on it today. Trevor Smith has revamped our website and integrated our database software Omeka into it. This means that our database is searchable globally. As a result, we have enquiries from all over the world. In one recent example, the Wong family visited us from Hong Kong with a particular interest on P G Wodehouse, because PGW's father Ernest was a Colonial Magistrate there. They presented the Museum with a packet of Chinese Oolong Tea to acknowledge that Jeeves served oolong tea to Bertie Wooster in two of PGW's books. We have now incorporated the tea into the PGW display!

But we are still only in the foothills of the technological mountain. Social media is, to quote Donald Rumsfeld, one of our 'known unknowns'. I know our presence is limited, but the Trustees have a peripheral personal involvement with social media, and do not have the cultural background for a comprehensive approach. We need a volunteer who understands this; can grasp it and run with it.

Similarly, we can use the new website to extend our marketing and attract visitors from outside Emsworth to see our displays. To this end your Trustees have agreed that the Museum will join the Art Fund. The Museum will feature in the Art Fund handbook, and on their website. In return, we will offer Art Fund members 10 percent reduction on items for sale. This should be a start to establishing ourselves on wider networks.

As many will know, the Museum is housed in the former offices of the Warblington Urban District Council. The offices became surplus to requirements when the council merged with Havant and Waterlooville Urban District Council in 1932, although Havant Borough Council (HBC) still own and maintain them. Since then, the upper floor of the building has been living accommodation, a dance studio and a room for hire. Opened in 1988, the Museum has benefitted from a constructive relationship with HBC. Today the Museum has a lease until 2034 at a peppercorn rent. We value HBC's long-term support in kind, and I firmly believe we have repaid their trust in the Museum by developing a substantial cultural asset for the borough.

However, Local Government is reorganising. It is unclear which part of the new Local Government organisation will be responsible for the Museum building, and what priorities they will have. Although we will probably not know for two or three years, the Trustees would prefer to maintain the status quo, but it is not our decision.

To maintain its relevance to Emsworth, the Museum needs to have a symbiotic relationship with the community. This is best achieved through the programme of temporary exhibitions, created by local groups to showcase their work. If they provide the material, Museum staff can mentor the production process. Typically, members of the exhibiting groups come into the Museum to see the exhibition, many visiting for the first time. After this introduction, we believe that they will return to delve into other parts of the Museum's displays.



Emsworth Museum, 10b North Street, PO10 7DD, today

From the Museum's perspective, the boundaries of Emsworth have deliberately been a little vague. We have never regarded the Hampshire/West Sussex border as a constraint. For example, Emsworth's ropemaking businesses were mainly in West Sussex; the Emsworth Yacht Harbour (who have produced exhibitions in the Museum to celebrate both their 50th and 60th anniversaries) is in West Sussex. We are fortunate that Emsworth is surrounded by history groups – in Havant, Westbourne and Rowlands Castle. This gives us the opportunity to share research with a wider audience, as we planned in the case of the Swing Riots exhibition. I believe that it is in everyone's interest that this cooperation continues.

One issue that Gerry raised is unchanged. We all continue to be proud of the fact that our Museum is volunteer run. This has provided us with a robust financial model that allowed us to weather the Covid pandemic without serious problems. Without volunteers, the Museum could not function. So, we try hard to recruit new supporting members; we then try hard to persuade them to become stewards; but we need to go further.

Running the Museum requires many inputs from administration to research. I am therefore always interested in our volunteers' backgrounds. Few of us have been involved with museums during our working lives, but many of us have developed transferable skills that could help this Museum. I have never thought it correct to formally interview volunteers because they are exactly that – volunteers. However, as many of you might have noticed, that does not stop me making a few gentle enquiries about volunteers' backgrounds, with a view to seeing how their expertise could be fitted into our organisation.

The constitutional change to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation brought with it a time limit for Trustees who can now only serve for three periods of three years before taking a break. This requirement is to ensure new volunteers are regularly recruited, because they are vital to injecting new energy, new expertise and new ideas into the Museum's work. On this basis, I am sure that Emsworth Museum and the Trust will continue its development for the next 50 years.