

# THE STORY OF SPELTHORNE MUSEUM: 1980-1989

## "Why can't Staines have a Museum?"

This headline in a local paper in October 1974 voiced the opinion of many local people. In May 1974, the former Urban Districts of Staines and Sunbury were amalgamated to form the Borough of Spelthorne. The same month, a full time archaeological officer, Kevin Crouch, was appointed to carry out excavations in advance of the planned redevelopment in the town centre.

The excavations, and the wealth of finds from the Roman town of *Ad Pontes* which lay buried beneath the modern town, led to the formation of Spelthorne Archaeological Field Group, to help with the excavations, but also to press for a local museum in which to display the many finds.



The distinctive façade of the Grade 2 listed Fire Station, dating from 1880, later became the museum's logo. Originally the stable block where the horses for the fire engine were kept survived at the side of the building, but this was demolished when the new Day Centre was built behind the museum, in 1982. The museum gained a new office as part of the construction, accessed off the balcony which now became available as a temporary display area.

At the inaugural meeting of SAFG at Ashford Library, the purpose of the group was agreed to be archaeological investigation of the area, as well as the creation of a museum, possibly in the new library due to be built in the Staines redevelopment. The newly formed Spelthorne Borough Council offered support for a museum, and various sites were discussed.

The Old Town Hall was vacant, the Magistrates Court having moved to a new site at Knowle Green. A local action group was trying to preserve the old GWR station in the Wraysbury Road, and this too was suggested as a possible location.

Eventually, the Old Fire Station next to Staines Town Hall was offered as a museum site. It was agreed that the management committee would consist of SAFG members with a representative from the Staines Local History Society.



Work on the museum displays was completed by 17th December 1979 when there was to be an ox roast in the Market Square as part of the proposed Victorian celebrations. The museum opened for a 'preview' evening, repeated on afternoons and evenings of the following week. Volunteers wore period costume.



The intact skeleton of a Bronze Age cow was excavated at the Quaker Burial Ground site behind Staines High Street in 1975, and was inevitably named 'Ermintrude' after the cow in 'The Magic Roundabout' children's TV series. It was mounted for display in the museum and is seen here with volunteer Michael Hobart.

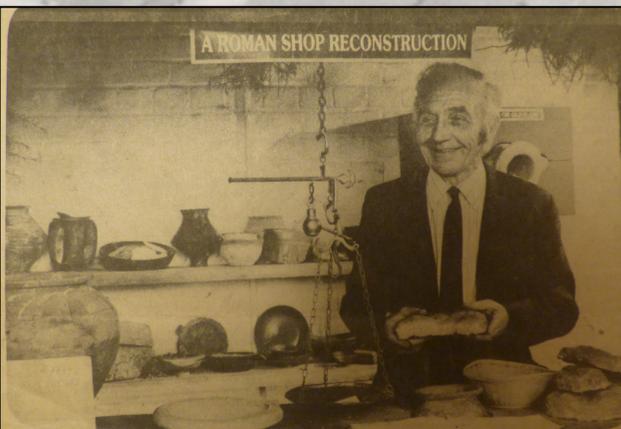
All the work clearing the Old Fire Station, which had been used as a store for market stalls since the fire station moved to Ashford in 1962, was carried out by volunteers, who also undertook the decorating. The major conversion work such as reinstating the original design of front doors (which had been replaced by a large sliding door), installing a balcony and filling in an inspection pit, were carried out by the Council. Events, including an exhibition of finds in the Old Town Hall in April 1979 which attracted 800 visitors, were held to raise funds. Local companies helped by supplying carpet, fittings and lighting etc. at reduced prices.



A major exhibit at the new museum was the Staines Parish fire engine dating from 1738, which had been in storage with Spelthorne Council after being moved from its old home in a shelter in the Memorial Gardens next to the Old Town Hall.



On 14th October 1981 a model of Roman Staines was added to the displays. It was made by Bob Walden of Surrey County Council's Architect's Department with information supplied by Staines Archaeological Unit. The buildings and layout were based on those at comparable sites. Wood and plastic sheet were used for the buildings, with wadding, string and wire for the approximately 500 trees, and about 450 miniature people. The work took about 18 months, between other projects.



The first Curator of the museum was Bill Painter, who was appointed in May 1978 as items for the museum started to be gathered. He negotiated the donation of a large collection of paintings from local artist Mary Stella Edwards, and is seen here in the replica Roman *taverna*. He restored much of the Roman pottery seen on display. Bill served for 10 years before stepping down in May 1988.



A Roman baby's feeding bottle found in Stanwell was purchased with Spelthorne Lottery funds and donated to the museum by the then Mayor, Gerry Caesar. He is seen here presenting it to Sue Shanks from the museum.

# THE STORY OF SPELTHORNE MUSEUM: 1990-1999



Jack Lovell took over as Curator in 1988. He is seen here at the opening of an exhibition about Shepperton Film Studios, with Studios manager Paul Oliver. Jack retired in 1998.

One of the Field Group's main fundraising methods was attending car boot sales. Most expenses were funded by grants and in May 1992 there was a successful application for an environmentally controlled display case to house the recently restored Roman helmet cheek piece.

At this time a new method of identifying museums was introduced. Each museum was allocated a unique code, which is used as a prefix to each item's unique identification number. The one for Spelthorne Museum is SMXSP – S for Staines, MX for Middlesex, SP for Spelthorne. Middlesex is still remembered in some ways!

In 1991 it was decided to apply for Registration for the museum, under the scheme administered by the former Museums and Galleries Commission (MGC). This would enable the museum to apply for grants from the local Area Museums Council. One of the requirements was that a professionally qualified Curatorial Adviser should be appointed. This unpaid role was filled by Rowena Lawrence, who was then Assistant Curator at Chertsey Museum. In May 1992 the museum was granted Provisional Registration under the scheme.



In 1992 it was discovered that Staines Town Hall, immediately adjacent to the museum, needed extensive underpinning work. The museum would have to close for at least six months and be cleared of exhibits whilst the work was done. It was decided to put this to good use and plan new displays in a freshly redecorated environment. When the museum closed on the 29<sup>th</sup> August 1992, collections went into storage and plans were made for the re-opening in Easter 1993. Unfortunately this timescale proved to be very optimistic.

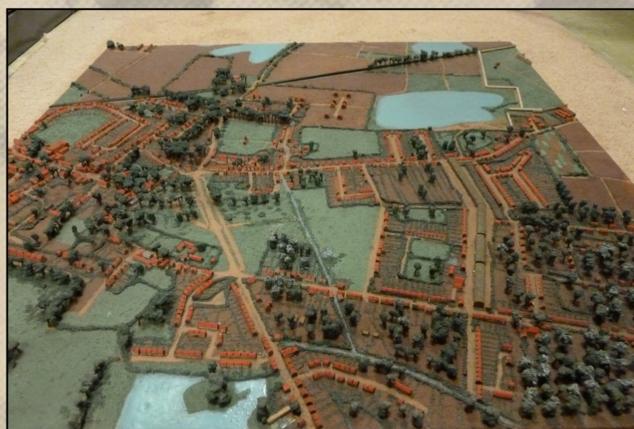


The refurbished Town Hall opened as an Arts Centre in 1994 and it was hoped the two concerns would work closely together. The museum re-opening schedule slipped, first to September 1993 then to February 1994. Plans and designs were still being made.

Finally on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1994, two years after closure, the museum was re-opened by the Mayor of Spelthorne, Councillor Andrew Hirst, who cut a cake in the shape of the museum. Also in attendance was the Fire Brigade complete with a fire engine to commemorate the building's original use. Opening displays included prehistoric and Roman Spelthorne, the Civil War, Staines Linoleum, the Fire Service and Spelthorne in picture postcards. The shop stock had been expanded and late night 'shopping evenings' were planned.



Fire display at the museum in 1994.



While the museum was closed an interesting relic of the Second World War was discovered in a Spelthorne Borough store. The local Home Guard had made a relief model of Staines Urban District area in sections, housed in a large chest. The sections fitted together and made a very large display.



A Jardine printing press was donated to the museum. It had been used for many years in Sunbury. This shows volunteers manhandling it into the museum.

A survey of local schools resulted in the formation of an Education Team who worked closely with the National Curriculum to provide an award winning service. The Education Team offered teaching sessions about the Victorian age to local schools. Members of the team dressed in appropriate costume and showed the children how a typical Victorian child's day would have been like. In 1997 they applied for an Interpret Surrey Award run by Surrey County Council for organisations that encouraged schoolchildren to visit local attractions. The Museum was shortlisted and received a commendation.



An environmentally controlled display case was ordered in June 1995 and museum displays were changed around. It's seen on the left here as museum volunteers enjoy a Christmas social evening. The rest of the cases had been made by the father of museum Chairman John Chapman.



The museum put on displays at several local events. This is a display at the Church Street Fair in Staines in June 1998.



Civil War display at the museum in 1994.

# THE STORY OF SPELTHORNE MUSEUM: 2000-2009

The first decade of the 21st Century was a challenging one for the museum. The Old Town Hall Arts Centre had not been a success, and plans were made to lease it for pub/restaurant use. As part of this, it was intended to demolish the Day Centre behind the Old Town Hall, unfortunately, this included the museum office, although a replacement office space, and for the first time a toilet, was to be created under the existing balcony. It was the start of a prolonged period of upheaval.

A positive note was that the museum was granted a 21 year lease of its premises. However, the demolition of the Day Centre meant that all exhibits had to be moved into storage. Problems with the work meant the reopening was delayed until May 2003. In November 2003 the Town Hall was sold, and the following year a possible new venue for the museum was found adjoining Staines Library, in the cars parks and Drugsline charity offices. The eventual plan was to combine the two and make an entrance to the library, but as an interim measure it was agreed to move into the car parks office only.



On Bank Holiday Monday, 7th May 2001, the museum celebrated its 21st Anniversary with an exhibition in the Day Centre. It was a rare chance to show the complete Home Guard and Lino factory models, the latter seen here with Spelthorne MP David Wilshire.



On 1st April 2000, Spelthorne passed from the Metropolitan Police area to that covered by Surrey Police. The brand new police station at Staines was the venue for a display by the museum on 2nd July.



Mayor of Spelthorne Pat Weston reopened the museum in its temporary home in the former car parks office on 30th July 2005.

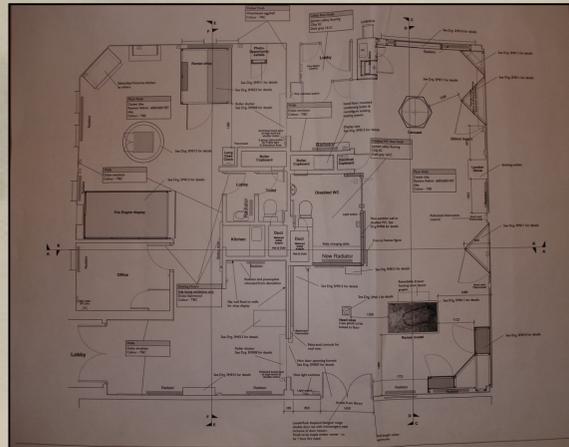


Museum volunteer Sue Pollard at the shop counter in the interim museum. The museum always aims to stock every current book about the history and archaeology of the Borough.

The Centenary of Staines Chamber of Commerce in 2003 was celebrated by a visit to the museum by 'Queen Victoria' (Pauline Hedges from the Chamber of Commerce).



Spelthorne Council made a successful bid to the National Lottery for funds towards the design of the new museum, and provided matching funding. Planning meetings were held between Spelthorne Council, museum staff and the designer.



The designers prepared a series of drawings of the proposed museum which went through several changes. This is a marked-up copy of a plan showing the final design.



On Saturday 21st October 2006 TV personality Michael Aspel officially opened the newly redesigned museum by cutting a ribbon at the entrance from Staines Library. Museum Chairman Nick Pollard and Mayor Andrew Hirst look on.



Volunteers from the Education Team in period costume supervise craft activities at a 'Roman Day' held at the museum on 14th July 2007

The Museum achieved Full Accreditation from the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in June 2007.



Spelthorne Young Archaeologist's Club (SPARCS) was founded in 2003 for young people up to the age of 17 interested in archaeology.



In 2009, for the 80th Anniversary of the start of the Second World War, an exhibition was held in the museum, with a display of military vehicles in the Riverside car park.

# THE STORY OF SPELTHORNE MUSEUM: 2010-2020



The Museum celebrated its 30th birthday in 2010 with a party for volunteers and members of SALHG. John Chapman, who was Chairman when the museum opened, cut a special cake made by volunteer Sue Pollard

The Friends of Spelthorne Museum merged with Spelthorne Archaeological Field Group on 1st April 2010. To acknowledge the historical interests of the former, the new group was renamed Spelthorne Archaeology and Local History Group. Several members of the Friends committee joined the committee of the new group, which continues to run the museum on an entirely voluntary basis, 40 years after opening.

After all the uncertainty and periods of closure and reopening of the previous decade, the museum settled down to a more stable existence. The co-location with the library worked well, with library staff opening the Elmsleigh Room Monday to Saturday, and museum volunteers opening the Thames Room three afternoons a week, as well as some Saturday mornings, and all day for special events.

Attendances average about 12,000 per year.



Spelthorne MP Kwasi Kwarteng is a historian and a frequent visitor to the museum, and is seen here opening an exhibition in 2012.



To mark the London Olympics of 2012, the museum put on a display about the previous London Olympics of 1948 and 1908. Mayor Robin Sider, seen here with his wife Jeanette and museum Chair Julia Gibbs, opened the exhibition.



The museum regularly exhibits at the Surrey Archaeological Society Symposium, and in 2012 won the Margary Award for the best display. Nick Pollard stands by the winning exhibit on Roman Staines.



Museum volunteers dressed in costume for an English Civil War themed family event - in July 2012.



Museum Chair Julia Gibbs presents a certificate and gifts to retiring Curator Ralph Parsons in January 2014, after his 16 years of service.



Although some distance from the Thames, the museum faced the real threat of flooding in February 2014 when surface water flooding from drains came within inches of the rear door. Doors were sandbagged and everything moveable was put up on breeze blocks, but fortunately the water did not get in.



A notable acquisition in 2014 was a large Victorian painting of Staines from the river by Edward H. Niemann, which was bought at auction with the help of an Art Fund grant. Long serving museum Secretary Jenny Scripps gave a very convincing performance as Queen Victoria to unveil it.



June 2015 saw a major celebration of the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta at nearby Runnymede. Spelthorne Council arranged its own celebrations at the Lammas, and a reception at Stanwell Village Hall at which the museum mounted a Magna Carta display, visited here by Mayor Suzy Webb.



Museum committee members and volunteers in May 2016. Jackie Browne (on right) served as Curator from 2014 to 2018.



One of the museum's proudest days came on 22nd August 2016, when the Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, Michael More-Molyneux, visited to present the volunteers with the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the equivalent of an MBE.