

THE WOODBRIDGE & MELTON SOCIETY



SPRING 2026



Dreary walkway transformed into vibrant space that sparks conversation

THIS ISSUE'S HIGHLIGHTS

- Society celebrates 75th Anniversary
- Meet new Chair, Joeske van Walsum
- Discover art form captivating Woodbridge youth
- Maritime Woodbridge explored by Nelson biographer
- History of the Burness Parish Rooms in Melton

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Grand past, uncertain future.

Debbi Francis

The Woodbridge and Melton Society Upcoming Talks 2026

1st April 2026 - Robin Gaylard – Hidden Ipswich

Ipswich is the oldest continuous settlement in the country. The first Anglo-Saxon town, its town centre street layout remains largely unchanged from medieval times. An ancient sea port and still a busy port, the magnificent Wet Dock was, in its day, the largest man-made enclosed area of water in the country. Trade brought peoples from far afield. From Roman times onward the Ipswich population has been a rich mix of cultures, food, fashion, art, crafts and architecture. If you think you know Ipswich, this might be a surprising evening.

7th October - Dr. Rik Hoggett – ‘Protect and Survive’: Cold War East Anglia

(more details to follow in the September newsletter and our website)

4th November - Sarah Doig – The Real Basil Brown

(more details to follow in the September newsletter and our website)

Talks are held at Quay Church, Quay Street in Woodbridge IP12 1BX 7.30 till 9ish. No booking required. Talks are free to Society members, and £5 for non-members.

If anyone has suggestions for future talks - with some link to the local area – please contact Cliff Hoppitt talks@woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk

HOW TO JOIN THE WOODBRIDGE AND MELTON SOCIETY

Complete the flyer or online form on our website (www.woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk/membership) and email or post it to the Membership Secretary at info@woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk Membership includes twice yearly newsletter, organised visits to places of interest and free entry to talks. Annual membership is £12 or £20 for a couple at the same address.

Know someone who loves our local area as much as you do, or perhaps a neighbour who has recently moved in? Pass the enclosed flyer on to them and help us grow our community

Letter from the Chair

Joeske van Walsum

What a privilege it is to serve a community that so clearly cares about where it lives. I am delighted to introduce myself as your new Chair.

In 2018 my wife Rachel, our son Hans and I left London for Woodbridge. We wanted Hans (then 11 years old) to experience a better environment. We love it here. Woodbridge has excellent schools and there is good arts provision, especially music, visual art and drama.

Woodbridge and Melton have a wonderful, shared waterfront. We walk the Deben daily towards Melton or Martlesham and Waldringfield. Martlesham Wilds is an excellent conservation example: enchanting. Just across the river is Sutton Hoo with its incredible history. There used to be a foot ferry, and we should revive that one day! The cinema offers exceptional programming — blockbusters, offbeat films, the National Theatre, the Metropolitan Opera. We have found the area full of people with fascinating careers from every background, with nobody flaunting their achievements; a peaceful world of understatement, which suits us very well.



Joeske, Rachel and Hans at home in Woodbridge

A bit about my background...as a youngster I found solace in classical music, studying at the Royal College of Music and becoming a professional flautist in my 20s. I set up a company to represent artists (classical musicians, particularly conductors) which became renowned worldwide for innovation, launching the careers of then unknown artists such as Esa Pekka Salonen, Mitsuko Uchida and Mariss Jansons who went on to distinguished international careers. After thirty years, I sold Van Walsum Management in 2008 and took a break. Rachel, 2-year-old Hans and I journeyed more than 2000 miles by boat from London to Istanbul, down the Danube, across the Black Sea, down the Bosphorus

and the Sea of Marmara. It was wonderful. We stopped off on the Orwell and revisited Snape Maltings, a world class artistic institution, much loved by the greatest artists — and where many of our own artists had appeared over the years. Our local connection goes back further, though. Rachel's first job was with the Aldeburgh Festival and her family has strong connections with Snape.

After our travels, we returned and set up Maestro Arts. The company, with Rachel as Chair, now manages artists worldwide in many disciplines, including music and visual arts.

Now, I am delighted to contribute to the Woodbridge and Melton Society (WMS) in gratitude for this wonderful environment—something never to be taken for granted. Being Chair of IAMA (International Artist Managers Association) for three exhilarating years has given me excellent training for the job.

The WMS has a strong and active committee of 14 hard working volunteers. But we can't do this on our own. WMS is pivotal to protecting many aspects of life here, and reasons for joining are many. For example, our opinions are taken seriously by Woodbridge Town Council, Suffolk County Council and Melton's Parish Council. We have a statutory right to look at and comment on Planning Applications, and have an active subcommittee to do just that. We have a Blue Plaque scheme. We are aiming to publish some literature on Woodbridge and its distinguished history. We aim to get wider recognition for the very interesting 16th Century lawyer, Thomas Seckford, who did so much for the town and without whom there would be no Woodbridge School, Shire hall, Seckford Care and much more. We have regular talks and we are bringing back visits. We are getting involved with saving the Shire Hall. We are trying to include youth in our work. The list goes on...

Your modest subscription gives you direct benefits but most importantly it is a way of being part of this thriving community, a way of contributing to its wellbeing. I personally don't understand how any citizen can consider not being a member! We need a stronger voice and that means more members. Doubling our numbers is the target. That could easily be done if every current member introduced one new one. Please support us in this way by passing on the enclosed flyer to one person.

I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible at our 75th anniversary celebrations on June 13th. Keep an eye on the website for details.

Yours, with enthusiasm for the year ahead.

Planning Matters

John Sagers, Planning Group Chair

Major Planning initiatives are currently under way at East Suffolk Council (ESC), but before looking at those, it might be useful to remind members what the WMS Planning Group does and how it does it.

In summary, the Planning Group regularly meets to consider and, where appropriate, comment on Planning Applications submitted to East Suffolk Council (ESC) in respect of Woodbridge and Melton. The Group also, collectively or individually, considers and comments on local initiatives such as Active Travel Woodbridge. We have also established a relationship with East Suffolk Council's Planning people; important if our Group's comments on applications are to be taken seriously.

The Group has nine local members with varied interests and backgrounds. We meet monthly to consider those Planning Applications validated by ESC in the prior month. A list of such applications is circulated to Group members in advance of the meeting and posted on the WMS website. Members will then individually access, on ESC's Planning Portal, the significant amount of detail on each application, the consideration of which can take quite some time. We then discuss at our meeting whether we wish to comment on individual applications and, if we do wish to comment, will write to the Planning Office accordingly. Our comments then appear (as a Consultee to the planning process) as a public comment and are listed online with the relevant application documentation.

We consistently object to the removal of or drastic surgery to trees and have established a useful rapport with the Council's Tree Officer on individual applications.

There have been few applications of great significance in recent months, other than the proposal for a care home on Yarmouth Road, Melton, to which WMS objected on a number of grounds. In that case we also suggested that such a use would be more appropriate on the long disused Melton Hill site.

Turning to wider matters, ESC is about to start work on a new Local Plan. The Council says this will set out 'where development, including new homes, employment land and infrastructure should take place up to at least 2044'. There has already been a 'call for sites' by the Council which ended on the 9th January and, as Central Government proposed a

housing target of 1667 homes per year for the ESC area, sites will clearly be needed. The Council will be publishing online early in 2026 details of all those sites submitted for consideration. We will give a link to that information when available. Much information about other issues relating to the new local plan and the timetable for its creation is available on ESC's website.

The Council are also now reviewing their 'Statement of Community Involvement'. This Statement explains how people can be involved in local planning applications and Neighbourhood Plans and is available online. A public Consultation on the Statement is now under way, accessed through the 'Statement of Community Involvement' section of ESC's website and open until 24th February.

Whilst the 'Community Involvement' exercise covers all of the ESC area, in the context of 'people involvement' the mention of Neighbourhood Plans is significant because Woodbridge, unlike Melton, does not currently have such a plan. In 2016 the Town Council decided not to create a Plan. Perhaps there were good reasons at the time, but Central Government says that Neighbourhood Planning 'enables communities to influence development proposals and land use in their Neighbourhood Plan area', very desirable in the case of Woodbridge, one would think – remember the 'Cheese Wedges'?

Also, any revenue raised by the Community Infrastructure Levy (a charge on development) can be passed directly to Town and Parish Councils who have an adopted Plan. It is therefore encouraging that we understand Woodbridge Town Council are contemplating the possibilities of creating such a plan and may be liaising with ESC in this respect.

Finally, on an even wider planning issue, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government issued in December 2025 a 123 page document proposing 'reform' to the National Planning Policy Framework.

Twelve 'Key Policy Changes' are proposed along with much other detail. Far too comprehensive to summarise here, these reforms include a permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development, substantial building around stations and 'densification' of development in and around towns.

For more details look at www.eastsuffolk.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-policy-and-local-plans/local-plans and select 'A new Local Plan for East Suffolk'.

Seventy-Five Years of Civic Pride

Siobhan Horner-Galvin, Editor

Celebrating our Diamond Anniversary in 2026, the WMS stands as a testament to the enduring power of community engagement. From its beginnings in 1951 as the Woodbridge Society to its current status serving both Woodbridge and Melton, it has been an unwavering guardian of our heritage – both the historic character as well as the environment of our two riverside towns.



Time to celebrate

Mike Whitby

A Post-War Vision

Back when post-war Britain was rebuilding and modernising, concerns among residents were growing about the rapid transformation of their market towns. When East Suffolk County Council proposed a new road in Woodbridge to address traffic congestion on The Thoroughfare, stating that ‘Shopping streets are mainly for the woman with the pram, and not to keep businesspeople going, and not for the motorist...public service vehicles are obliged to get on the footpath to pass stationary vehicles,’ the residents acted. After an emergency town meeting in St Mary’s House, the very first Society committee meeting took place on April 5th, 1951, with a recommendation sent on to the council that a one-way system would be preferable to a new road. Eventually a relief road was built – Station Road, Quayside and Lime Kiln Quay Road – with The Thoroughfare becoming a one-way road. And the committee no doubt recognised the need for an organisation that could stand up for the residents’ viewpoint.

From the outset, WMS’ mission was clear: to promote the conservation, protection and improvement of the physical and natural environment of Woodbridge and its environs. This vision, remarkably prescient for its time, predated much of the national heritage conservation movement and demonstrated the foresight of the Society’s founders. According to local lore, one of the previous secretaries mislaid most of the old records, so unfortunately there are no remaining details about the individuals that started the Society; if anyone does have any information, we’d be delighted to hear from you.



Melton Old Church

Joining Forces with Melton

While the WMS began with its focus on Woodbridge, the close relationship with neighbouring Melton meant its influence naturally extended across both communities. February 1988’s issue details their involvement in an application to tear down Melton Old Rectory: ‘The Committee fought hard to retain the Rectory and instigated local press coverage of the application’. Unfortunately, the building was eventually demolished to make way for thirteen flats on the site.

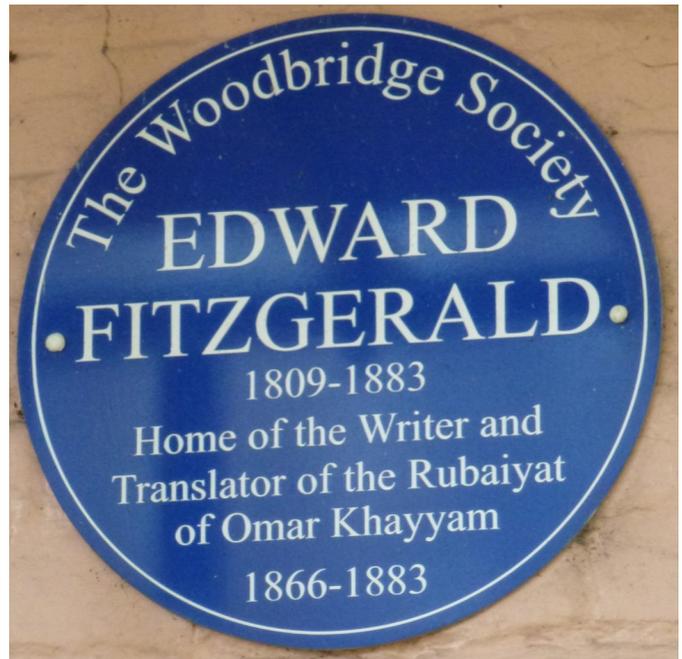
It took until 2023 for this relationship to be formally recognised in the renamed, The Woodbridge and Melton Society (WMS), acknowledging the interconnected nature of our two historic towns and their shared concerns.



Market Hill

Debbi Francis

The plaques honour an impressive array of historical figures. Edward FitzGerald, the renowned translator of the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, is commemorated at his former home, Little Grange on Pyches Road (see pg 8). Bernard Barton, the Quaker poet and close friend of FitzGerald, is remembered at Barton Cottage on Cumberland Street. Thomas Churchyard, the distinguished landscape painter, and Sir Ian Jacob, former Director-General of the BBC, are also honoured with plaques. The scheme has expanded to recognise figures of national significance such as Norman Heatley OBE, a pioneer in the production of penicillin, and John Clarkson, the anti-slavery campaigner. More recently, plaques have been unveiled for Sir Archibald Edward Garrod, the physician who made groundbreaking discoveries about genetic inheritance, and Margaret Rope, the leading stained-glass artist. Most notably, in 2022, a plaque was unveiled at Tranmer House, Sutton Hoo, commemorating Edith Pretty, whose curiosity and determination led to one of Britain's most significant archaeological discoveries.



These plaques educate and entertain residents and visitors about local history, create a tangible connection to the past, and foster pride in the area's cultural heritage.

Guardians of the Green

Beyond buildings and architecture, WMS also champions the natural environment, advocating for tree preservation, highlighting iconic local trees and speaking out for the important green spaces. This work has taken on increased urgency as climate change and biodiversity loss have become pressing concerns. Through collaborations with local organisations, The WMS engages with issues such as water quality, the River Deben waterfront, and the

Planning and Development: A Watchful Eye

Throughout its 75 years, the Society's core function has been to scrutinise planning applications. The Planning Group reviews applications in Woodbridge and Melton and makes expert representations to local authorities, ensuring development respects the historic character of both towns whilst meeting contemporary needs. This work requires a delicate balance. WMS does not simply oppose change; rather, it advocates for thoughtful, sustainable development that enhances rather than diminishes the unique qualities that make Woodbridge and Melton special. From the redevelopment of key riverside sites to concerns about traffic management and the future of historic buildings, WMS' voice aims to be informed and influential. As part of this influence, WMS newsletter has served as an important forum for discussing planning matters, keeping members informed about significant proposals and WMS' responses. Now digitised, it is both a record of activities and a resource for local history.

Celebrating Local Heritage

One of WMS' most visible achievements has been its Blue Plaque scheme, bringing national recognition to the area's rich historical associations. Inspired by London's famous plaques, WMS began its own programme to commemorate remarkable individuals who lived and worked locally.

preservation of landscapes to contribute to broader conservation efforts.

Bringing History to Life

With deep understanding that conservation requires fostering knowledge and appreciation of local heritage, WMS' programme of lectures, summer visits, its website and newsletter have educated generations of residents about the history, architecture, and natural environment of the area. Talks have covered diverse topics, from Sutton Hoo archaeology to Cumberland Street's history, from building restoration to nature reserve management. Summer visits have taken members to gardens, historic houses, and archaeological sites, creating opportunities for learning and fellowship.



Inside the Longshed

Mike Whitby

The People Behind the Society

The Society's success over 75 years owes everything to the dedication of its volunteers. Our new chair, Joeske van Walsum, brings a wealth of experience from business and the arts (see p3). The current committee includes individuals with expertise in healthcare, property development, education, museum work, journalism and literature. This diversity ensures the WMS can address the challenges facing our historic towns in this rapidly changing world.

Looking to the Future

As WMS enters its 76th year, it faces both familiar challenges and new opportunities. With local government changes expected in 2028, questions about the future management of green and built spaces have taken on new urgency. WMS continues to engage with Woodbridge Town Council to ensure residents' voices are heard in these crucial decisions. Climate change, housing pressures, and economic development will continue to test WMS' ability to balance conservation with progress. Yet its 75-year track record suggests it is well-equipped for these challenges. By bringing together people who care deeply about these towns, marshalling expertise and historical knowledge, and maintaining

constructive dialogue with decision-makers, WMS hopes to continue to fulfil its founding mission.

However, The WMS' longevity is itself remarkable. Many civic organisations founded in the post-war period have faded away, unable to sustain momentum or attract new generations of volunteers.

The WMS remains vibrant and relevant after 75 years speaks to the enduring importance of its work and the deep affection that residents feel for these two historic towns on the River Deben. But let us not get complacent. More than ever, we need the younger generations to step forward for their communities; to join WMS to represent the broad range of voices from our communities. It is essential to the success of our next 75 years.

Says Joeske, 'As Woodbridge and Melton look ahead, you can do so with the confidence that comes from knowing your heritage is in good hands. But we need more of these hands, young and older, small and large. Please talk to your families and friends and urge them to join WMS, to step up for the places they live and love. We need them to continue the fight for the blue plaques that dot our streets, the carefully preserved historic buildings, the protected green spaces, and the thoughtful planning decisions that all bear witness to 75 years of dedicated stewardship. Our diamond anniversary is not just a celebration of the past but an investment in the future, ensuring that generations to come will live in and enjoy towns with unique character and historic resonance, set in a thriving, natural environment.'



Young and old in Elmhurst Park

SAVE THE DATE - 13th JUNE

Mark your calendars and joins as we celebrate a truly special milestone - our 75th Anniversary! We're bringing the community together for a fantastic daytime event and you won't want to miss it. Full details will be revealed soon. Watch this space www.woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk

Blue Plaque for Edward Fitzgerald

Pieter Shipster, Blue Plaques Champion

Edward Marlborough (Purcell) FitzGerald (1809–1883) – 'EFG' as he signed his letters – is unquestionably the most widely-known Woodbridge resident and recipient of a WMS Blue Plaque. This recognition is entirely appropriate, given his lifelong connection with coastal Suffolk, particularly Woodbridge and the surrounding area where he was born, resided for much of his life, and is buried.

Early Life and Family

Born on 31 March 1809 at the rented Bredfield White House, Fitzgerald was the seventh of eight children in a family he himself acknowledged as eccentric, once writing that 'we are all mad.' His mother, Mary FitzGerald (1779-1855), was an extremely wealthy Anglo-Irish heiress who had inherited two fortunes – one from an aunt and a larger one from her father. Despite her wealth and social standing, evidenced by her occasional arrival at Bredfield in a yellow carriage pulled by four black horses, Mary remained a distant and aloof mother. As Fitzgerald ruefully remarked, 'we children were not much comforted.'

His father, John Purcell MP (1775-1852) – also Mary's first cousin – trained as a lawyer but never practised. In 1848 he became bankrupt over a mining venture, and the following year Fitzgerald's parents became estranged. These events precipitated the change of family surname. More significantly, Mary FitzGerald's personal wealth ensured her son never had to earn a living, enabling him to lead a dilettante life dedicated to leisure and pleasures – especially literature, music, sailing, and friendships.

Education and Residences

After a brief period in Paris from 1816-18, the family returned to the UK following the death of Fitzgerald's maternal grandfather, adopting his surname, FitzGerald. Edward attended Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds before going on to Trinity College, Cambridge (1826-30). A Suffolk friend recounts an amusing anecdote from his Cambridge days: when his mother arrived by coach and sent for her son, he could not come down to see her as his only shoes were at the cobblers.

Throughout his adult life, Fitzgerald maintained strong ties to the Woodbridge area, moving between various residences. From 1824-35 the family lived in rented Wherstead Lodge near Ipswich, before moving to Boulge Hall near Woodbridge. Fitzgerald himself lived in a small cottage on the family estate in Boulge until 1853. Following his father's death, he moved to lodgings in Farlingaye Hall on

Hasketon Road, Woodbridge, where he remained until 1860.

His next home, from 1860-73, was a first-floor apartment at 10 Market Hill, above a gun-maker's shop – these dates can still be seen today in a commemorative memorial stone on the building.



In 1864, Fitzgerald purchased Little Grange in Pyches Road but, characteristically generous, allowed his nieces to use the property before finally taking up residence himself from 1873-83. It is on this final property that the Blue Plaque honouring him was placed, visible from the road on the upper brickwork.

Literary Fame: The Rubáiyát

Fitzgerald's national and international fame derives from his association with *The Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám, a long, lyric poem in quatrains exploring the eternal themes of life, death, love, God, afterlife, pleasure, and religion. The original Persian text was written by Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), a Persian astronomer and mathematician.

The Persian texts were first sent to Fitzgerald from Kolkata, India by his friend Professor Edward Cowell (1826-1903), whom he first met in 1845. Cowell, a fellow Suffolk neighbour from Ipswich and an exceptionally talented linguist who later became a Cambridge University Professor, had initially taught Fitzgerald Spanish. Later, while Cowell was a student at Magdalen College, Oxford, Fitzgerald would visit him for Persian language studies.

Fitzgerald emphasised that his version of the poem – translated first into Latin, then into English – was a 'free' rather than literal translation, captured in his own words as 'better a live sparrow than a dead eagle.' The first anonymous 1859 publication of 250 copies received almost no public attention. However, this changed dramatically, partly through Dante, Gabriel Rossetti, Algernon Swinburne, and

the Pre-Raphaelite movement. By 1879 Fitzgerald had revised, expanded, and published three further editions. His 'translation' has now sold millions of copies, remains in print today, and led to the widespread establishment of Omar Khayyam Clubs.

Friendships and Personal Life

Fitzgerald's life-long talent for friendship began early at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he made two particularly strong friendships: William Makepeace Thackeray, who described him as his oldest and best friend, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who said Fitzgerald was the friend he loved most. His sexuality and friendships are much discussed by biographers, but what remains undisputed is his life-long capacity to attract and keep strong friendships, particularly – though not exclusively – with younger men such as William Browne and Joseph 'Posh' Fletcher. He once remarked of himself, 'I am an idle fellow, of a very ladylike turn of sentiment: and my friendships are more like loves, I think.'

His lodgings on Market Hill proved most convenient for their proximity to The Bull Inn, which he frequented and where he became a good friend of its landlord and horse-trader, John Grout (1821-86). Here, Fitzgerald would entertain his distinguished guests, including Alfred Lord Tennyson. When told that Woodbridge was honoured to have such a guest as Tennyson, Grout remarked, 'he might be the Poet laureate, but he don't know much about hosses when I showed him over my stables.'

This 'cheerful hostelry' – as he described The Bull Inn – was also a frequent venue for gatherings of what Fitzgerald called the 'Woodbridge Wits', an informal friendship group comprising the Quaker poet Bernard Barton (1784-1849), George Crabbe (1785-1857), a poet and clergyman, and Thomas Churchyard (1798-1873), an artist and solicitor. Here, they would discuss their shared interests in literature, painting, and the arts. Blue Plaques now mark the former residences of both Barton and Churchyard in Cumberland Street.

Fitzgerald's close friendship with Bernard Barton led to his most unfortunate, mismatched, and unhappy marriage in 1856 to Barton's daughter, Lucy (1808-98). From all accounts this was certainly no 'love match' but arose from a 'misunderstanding' when Fitzgerald and Lucy – who had introduced him to her father in 1836 – attended Barton's deathbed in 1849. Fitzgerald promised Barton that he would take care of his daughter, upon which Barton gave the pair 'his blessing'. Lucy understood this to mean 'marriage'; Fitzgerald did not, but failed to make this clear.

This misunderstanding explains their seven-year

engagement, Lucy's refusal to accept financial support, and their 'separation' – though not divorce – within a year of marriage. The chain of events is confirmed in Fitzgerald's January 1857 letter to Edward Cowell: 'My marriage...had good Sense and Experience prevailed instead of Blind Regard on one side...never would have been completed.'

Life in Woodbridge and Coastal Suffolk

With the financial means to live anywhere, Fitzgerald chose to spend most of his life in the Woodbridge area. This decision clearly suited his character, temperament and need for contemplation, reflecting his preference for friendships over celebrity, his detachment from literary fame, and his inclination toward introspection rather than display. Despite his inherited wealth he lived modestly, disliking ostentation. He dressed shabbily in silk top hat and slippers, and was widely regarded by the locals as a harmless eccentric, earning the nicknames 'Old Fitz' and (less kindly) 'Dotty'.

One of his great passions was 'his beloved Deben' – sailing and exploring the estuaries of coastal Suffolk. In 1860 he bought his first boat, and in May 1861 he wrote to his friend Cowell, 'my chief amusement in life is boating on river and sea.' To another friend, he wrote of Aldeburgh, 'There's no sea like the Aldburgh Sea. It talks to me.' In 1863 he named one of his boats 'Scandal' because 'nothing travelled faster out of Woodbridge.' He later acquired a herring lugger, 'Meum and Tuum' (Mine and Yours), which he co-owned with 'Posh' Fletcher, a local fisherman; together they made frequent sailing trips up to Lowestoft.

He clearly loved the gentle rhythms of Suffolk's rural and coastal areas, which stood in sharp contrast to his experience of London: 'I am very glad to be back. For the Weather was wretched: the Streets all Slush: and I all alone wandering about in it.' In another letter he wrote, 'I long to spread wing and fly into the kind clear air of the country.'

Death and Legacy

Fitzgerald died on 14th July 1883 in Norfolk at the Old Rectory, Merton, while visiting his friend George Crabbe. He was buried in his own grave next to the family mausoleum in the churchyard of the Church of St. Michael & All Angels, an estate church in the grounds of former Boulge Hall, close to his birthplace in Bredfield.

Curiously, for an agnostic, the words on his tomb read 'It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves.' In 1893, a Persian rosebush grown from a cutting from Omar Khayyám's tomb was planted at his graveside – a fitting memorial to the man who brought the medieval Persian poet's verses to the English-speaking world.

Going Public

Debbi Francis, Writer and Artist

Last year, after a lifetime of quiet creativity, I took a deep breath and decided to take part in Suffolk Open Studios, meaning that I'd be showing my work in public for the very first time.

Giving myself an immovable goal was invaluable – as a master procrastinator it was hugely motivating to have an absolute deadline. And I wasn't going to let my lack of a studio stand in my way. I would invite people into my home where I would display my work in my lounge.

For the uninitiated, Suffolk Open Studios is a community of artists and makers who open their studios/creative spaces to the public for free each year over a series of weekends in June. It forms part of a loose amalgam of similar events taking place nationwide each year.

On reflection it's been quite the journey for me, from dreaming about becoming a full-time artist – in the sense of going public with my work – to finishing the year with a successful exhibition at Lois Gunn in Church Street, having sold several paintings; to having my work hanging in shops in Suffolk, and with one piece travelling as far away as Australia to its new owner.

Finding inspiration in Woodbridge

But I'm getting ahead of myself. For a moment let's rewind to the spring of 2022 when I first moved here. When asked why I chose to make Woodbridge my home, I usually reply because of its creative community - but of course it's more nuanced than that; Woodbridge and East Suffolk in general has always been a place that's close to my heart. Nevertheless, back in in 2022, single and of a certain age, without children, friends or family in the area, moving here by myself was something of a leap of faith.

Fortunately, Woodbridge has proved to be overflowing with opportunity and inspiration. Alongside the wonderfully friendly people, I have delighted in the natural environment, and the soft, beguiling nature of the landscape. The colourful old houses hugging the timeless streets, the proximity to the coast, and the fascinating ever-changing ebb and flow of the river Deben.

But in retrospect I'm aware of how much I put on the line, pushing myself – often shy and very daunted – into a new world, striking up conversations with perfect strangers, joining everything I could: a new book group, a choir, life



Art at home

Debbi Francis

drawing classes, walking, driving, dreaming my way around the east coast – and slowly but surely finding my way.

An early emotional touchstone for me was the arrival of the swifts. During the hot summer of 2022 they'd already made landfall before I turned the key in my new front door, their sound the very essence of long, languid evenings and warm summer air.

Now with every passing year they arrive in numbers just in time for my birthday. When I hear them calling everything seems right with the world, and it feels filled with infinite possibility. If a tiny bird can fly to Suffolk from distant Africa then who knows what I might be able to do.

Finding joy in creativity

As I get older I often find myself thinking that creativity is my saving grace. It can rescue me from sadness, and it can also make me extraordinarily happy, in short it's something I can always put my faith in. Despite this knowledge I was rather confounded to find myself filled up with so many uncomfortable emotions the first time I showed my work in public. In hindsight I can completely understand why I felt this way; it's intensely personal sharing something which you've poured your heart and soul into, in fact it's only surprising that I wasn't better emotionally prepared.

In the months leading up to June I worked incredibly hard, spending countless hours at my kitchen table, lost in shape and colour. I can't paint at speed – similarly with writing – I have to work my way into and through each idea, sometimes with painstaking slowness, reworking and building up with each layer. And it can be emotionally painful too, when more often than not, I'm unhappy with what I produce. But I find great solace and satisfaction in the process – the doing of it all – though sometimes I have to remind myself that's where the joy is.



Magnolia Charlotte

Debbi Francis

Still life

I mostly paint objects from my everyday, with an emphasis on saturated colour and brilliant primaries. Still life is the subject matter I'm most drawn to, however inspiration has roots. It's tied to memory, place, history, or a fleeting moment worth holding onto. Time is hidden under the surface. Perfection isn't the point. It shifts with the light, the seasons, and the life unfolding around it.

My aim with my work is to create feelings of quiet joy, focusing on the simple pleasures of a curving jug or a beautiful bowl. I'm fascinated by the shape and tonal qualities of ceramics, glass, flowers and fruit, often drawing from objects collected over many years, from my favourite old blue jug to vintage finds, and Moroccan and Scandinavian glassware.

Spending so much time painting meant that I didn't have as much to spend my with my very dear old mum. Freda aged 91, spends much of her time now lying down and misses me dreadfully. The only

downside of my move to Suffolk is the increased distance from mum. And because she's now too elderly to travel, I can't directly share with her what I love most about living here.

Thankfully, through Open Studios I found a solution. On my regular FaceTime calls (thank god for FaceTime!) I'd carefully position my phone so mum could watch me paint as we spoke. I don't even know quite how we began, but mum loved this; watching me paint was apparently intensely soothing and absorbing. It became a wonderful way to spend time together – her watching quietly and intently as I built up layers of colour. We'd spend hours like this, the focus on the painting lending an ease to our conversation akin to when walking with a friend, allowing all sorts of subjects to arise and peacefully fade away, returning to the gentle sound of my brush moving across the canvas.



Blue jug

Debbi Francis

Now whenever I pick up my brush I think of mum, we still 'paint together' frequently and as I prepare for Suffolk Open Studios this year she will be watching. I'm delighted to have found a way to directly share my life in Suffolk with my mum through my creative practice, through my writing, my sketchbook and most of all through my paintings. It's not perfect, but perhaps that's the point. Whilst worrying about going public with my painting, I found a beautiful private studio between me and mum.

Debbi Francis will be taking part in Suffolk Open Studios in June 2026. You can follow Debbi on Instagram @deborahf

Graffiti isn't Vandalism, it's Art

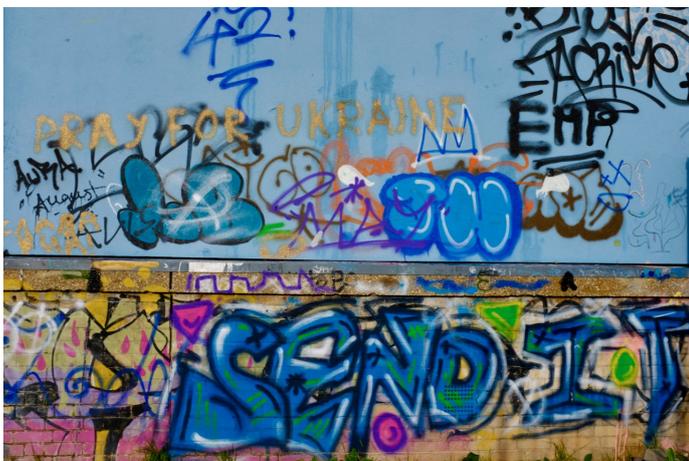
Ethan Whiting, Artist & Student

Often dismissed as vandalism, graffiti is better understood as a vital form of street art that reflects the voice, creativity, and social realities of the communities in which it appears.

Street art is made in public spaces, often without permission, which upsets some who like things to follow an ordered hierarchy of control and authority. But being unauthorised does not make it any less art. As an umbrella term, street art covers genres ranging from large murals to *trompe l'oeil* pavement drawings and includes graffiti.

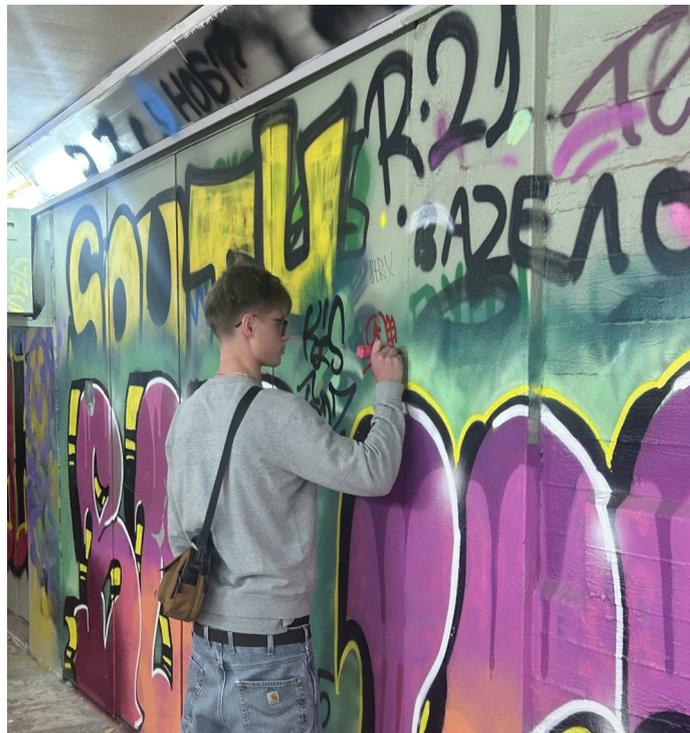
Broadly, the term graffiti refers to writings or drawings that are carved, scribbled, or sprayed onto public property. Graffiti has been associated with gang culture, political protest, and high society fine art. Think of the building-sized murals painted by Keith Haring and Shepard Fairey, or Banksy's world-renowned guerrilla stencils. Graffiti is diverse and varies in quality and purpose and, as a result, it is also highly contentious and causes lots of debates about its ethics, and even its validity as an art form.

Graffiti can be simple signature-like tags made in seconds with a Posca pen, or complex spray-painted masterpieces that take days to create. Basic forms include tags and throw-ups (quick, bubble-style pieces); more elaborate forms include 'wild style' (complex, interconnected letters), blockbuster (large, blocky letters), and stencil art (made in advance and quickly sprayed on a wall); and other types include paste-ups (using posters), sticker art, and 3D graffiti.



Woodbridge skate park

Like murals commissioned for galleries or public buildings, graffiti uses visual language – colour, symbolism, scale, and placement – to communicate ideas, protest injustice, or celebrate identity.



Artist at work

Graffiti's location in public spaces is not an accident, but a defining feature: graffiti is accessible, democratic, and rooted in lived urban experience, rather than elite institutions.

I am a graffiti artist myself and recently completed a large-scale spray-painted freehand mural on a wall at my high school (I was given permission). When I started, this space was just a bare brick wall, with no life, no individuality. It said nothing. As part of my Art A-level, I created an artwork that altered the way this wall is seen and used, transforming it from a purely functional, structural object into a space of life, creativity, and conversation. James Hutch, Head of Art at Woodbridge School, said it shows 'a vibrant inclusive approach to making art on campus' proving 'that artists can bring their work to an audience through murals, rather than wait for an audience to come to them. It's proactive and inspiring.'

My mural took weeks of planning and design, with multiple drafts, sketches, and ideas. I had to present a finished design to my headteacher for it to be approved. It then took two weeks and 24 cans of spray paint to complete. Whenever I see a bare wall, I see a blank canvas, and an opportunity to create art.

In our local area, many people will be familiar with the graffiti wall at the Woodbridge skatepark. Some may see it as an eyesore, but to me the graffiti wall is a space where young and old, talented and aspiring artists can explore their craft and their own ideas, where they are free to create as part of a very



Before

‘Ethan’s latest mural has had a huge impact at school. Students want to see more of his work and we have seen lots of younger artists starting to engage in this artform.’

James Hutch, Head of Art at Woodbridge School.

supportive, non-judgemental community. And because it is a legal space, we can work there without fear of being chased away! It’s the only place like that in our town.

The lack of legal spaces for street artists to come together to share and create is, I think, what causes artists to resort to doing their work in unauthorised spaces. The graffiti wall is proof that if we are given a space, we will make it our own, adding value and building community. The Woodbridge skatepark would be extremely dull without the vibrancy and energy that street art brings. It transforms grey concrete with life and colour. A town without graffiti is a less interesting place.

Historically, many now-celebrated art movements – from Impressionism to photography – were once criticised for breaking rules yet later recognised as expanding what art could be. Similarly, graffiti challenges traditional boundaries of art by transforming neglected walls into sites of dialogue and expression. Rather than blight, graffiti can revitalise spaces, foster cultural identity, and document contemporary urban history in real time.

Street art’s value lies with the people, not with the collectors who put a dollar sign on its worth, or the critics who claim the authority to judge whether something is good or not. It is art made by the people, for the people. This is why it is so important as an art form: because it is accessible to all. Every political movement has involved some form of street art used to get its message across, broadcasting to the people from the very roads they march down. This is why it is such a powerful and unique art form, and why I think there is nothing else quite like it: without the public eye, there is no street art.

From its modern emergence in the late twentieth century, street art and graffiti have been closely tied to protest and resistance, serving as visual tools – even weapons – for those excluded from traditional platforms of power. In cities like New York during the 1960s and 1970s, graffiti became a way for



After

marginalised youth to assert visibility in environments shaped by inequality, neglect, and racial tension. Across the world, public walls have functioned as noticeboards for dissent: political slogans sprayed during the Paris student protests of 1968, anti-apartheid messages in South Africa, and revolutionary murals in Latin America all demonstrate how street art can transform urban spaces into sites of activism.

In my own graffiti I seek to comment on political and social issues. One of my pieces, titled ‘Protest’, clearly references the influence of politics and social commentary in street art. This work is spray paint on cardboard and depicts a black and white figure with a raised clenched fist against the background of an American flag. I made it in response to Donald Trump’s re-election in 2024, using my artwork to express my opinion of the American people’s decision. The black and white figure in ‘Protest’ references the history of street art, as well as the history of America. This piece is one of my favourites to date, because of the strong connection and background it has with street art, as well as with the history of America. I find that graffiti is the perfect medium for a piece like this, because I can use it to convey emotions and ideas in a very simple and direct way.

Because it often exists outside official approval, graffiti is uniquely suited to protest — it is immediate, anonymous, and almost impossible to silence. By occupying public space, graffiti challenges authority, disrupts everyday routines, and forces passers-by to confront political and social issues, making it a powerful historical record of resistance written directly onto the fabric of the city or town.

Follow Ethan Whiting’s graffiti on Instagram: @art.ewwww



Woodbridge Maritime Past

Roger Knight, Author and Historian



Woodbridge, about 1890-1900. Note how quiet it is. The Thames barge, on a rising tide, appears to be ghosting up the quay by the Tide Mill, just visible. The skipper is using his topsail and the mud as a brake.

Woodbridge Museum

There are very large gaps in our knowledge of the port of Woodbridge and, indeed, the maritime history of Suffolk. Recently, we have been served well for the medieval period by Mark Bailey (2007), and there is an excellent article on the mysterious port of Goseford further down the Deben by Peter Wain (2016). For the 1500-1700 period, the hard grind with the documents has been done by a handful of scholars before and after the Second World War, such as T.S. Willan (1938, 1976) and N.J. Williams (doctorate 1952, published posthumously 1988). But since that time there has been a procession of books copying these works (and each other) with little understanding and providing no references, which has only served to confuse. A more than honourable exception to this process has been Robert Malster's *Maritime Suffolk* (2017).

Research on documents from early modern history is difficult. Recently historians at the University of Southampton received a large Arts and Humanities Research Council grant for a project on 'English Merchant Shipping and Maritime Communities, 1588-1765'. They have put information from the surviving Port Books of England on a large database

and are currently rolling out the results, to be completed in March this year.

The earliest mention of Woodbridge is in 1508, when three ships from the town visited Newcastle: the purpose can only have been to collect coal. The medieval economy of England was built on firewood and charcoal. If 1508 was the first time that coal was brought to Woodbridge, it is perhaps the most important date in its history. Coal was to shape Woodbridge and enable it to flourish. It began a North Sea trade which lasted for 350 years.

As coal came up the Deben, grain began to go in the opposite direction. This was hardly unique, for the corn/coal trade was happening around England and in the five major rivers of England: the Yorkshire Ouse, the Trent, the Great Ouse, the Thames and the Severn. They were all navigable, with long tidal stretches which were free and common to all; consequently, the lack of tolls meant that little was recorded, and thus little is known today about this traffic. However, in Woodbridge in 1589 the first Custom House was set up for overseas trade: further evidence of the town's importance as a port.

The seventeenth century seems a complex maze today, with long periods of a very bitter civil war and religious strife. One surprising consequence of this was the development of Woodbridge as a major shipbuilding centre. A year after the execution of King Charles I in 1649, a warship of 48 guns and 575 tons was launched at Woodbridge. This burst of shipbuilding went on until 1698.

In all, seven warships were built, the largest of which was 691 tons. The building of ships of this size was the largest industrial project of their day. Shipwrights, caulkers, smiths, labourers and other trades would have arrived in Woodbridge in numbers, at a time when shipwrights could be impressed by the navy, so it can be safely assumed that numbers of them would be unhappy (Impressment was the enforcement of able-bodied but unwilling men into naval or military service through crude and violent methods. Until the early 19th century this practice flourished in port towns throughout the world). Gangs of workmen would have combined to lift the frames to the vertical, then rush the timbers from the steam box to the frame. There would have been a lot of noise and shouting.

Furthermore, this flurry of shipbuilding is nationally significant, as up to 1650 there was not really a standing navy in the UK. Most ships in the fleet were hired merchant ships, led by one or two large and highly decorated flagships such as the *Sovereign of the Seas*. But Cromwell's strategic ambitions required a permanent fleet. And this process started in Woodbridge.

Why did the Navy choose Woodbridge? Some answers are obvious. There was timber here, the Dutch wars were being fought on the doorstep, yet the difficult navigation of the Deben kept the warships safe from the aggressive Dutch. But the full story has not yet been told: the answers will be in the National Archives and the Hold in Ipswich. (It is a good research topic, and there are currently some very fine C17th maritime historians in UEA, because of the HMS *Gloucester* wreck project, who could supervise a research degree. All you have to do is to work hard and master the rather awkward 17th century handwriting).

What is known is that Woodbridge flourished. T.S. Willan lists the number of Woodbridge cargo shipments to London during 1683 as 69, consisting of butter, cheese, peas, wood ashes and timber. Incoming cargoes from London included iron, glasses, cloth, pitch, tar, resin, soap and vinegar.

More modest merchant shipbuilding continued during the eighteenth century. The coal/grain trade

continued, and butter, cheese and barley (for brewing) went to London. The farmers prospered in the regular wars as grain prices always rose when hostilities started. The long Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars were very prosperous. The port was critical for maintaining the Woodbridge military camp, there between 1803 and 1815, containing 4,000 soldiers, for ships were essential for the transport of bulk supplies. We have some measure of how prosperous Woodbridge was during those years, for the 1801 census gives the population as 3,020. Ten years later, in 1811, it had increased by 30% to 4,332.



Woodbridge Regatta in Edwardian times, emphasising the end of the industrial port.
Woodbridge Museum

The emphasis of the port of Woodbridge changed in the nineteenth century when the growing northern cities, particularly in Yorkshire, needed feeding. Woodbridge grain was taken up the coast to Goole, well up the Humber, by round sterned barges called 'billyboys'. There they lowered their masts and proceeded up the canals to cities such as Leeds and Wakefield. Then they turned around and brought coal back. Thames barges continued with the London trade and further down the south coast.

This period of prosperity lasted until 1870, when cheap American wheat – travelled from the Prairies by the newly built railroads – was transported to Liverpool in large ships. Severe agricultural depression in England resulted. The railway came to Woodbridge in 1859 and eventually took the coal trade away. In 1882 Woodbridge lost its Customs port status and the Customs House in Quay Street closed, and it became subsidiary of Ipswich. It was the official end of the Port of Woodbridge.

Of course, it wasn't quite the end, as barges and some steamers continued to use the quays; but increasingly, recreational yachting and yacht building became the business of the River Deben.

Iconic Local Trees - The Graceful Alder

Nick Nicholson, Garden Designer



Young alder showing symmetrical branch structure Nick Nicholson

A Poet's Vision

In Seamus Heaney's poem 'Planting The Alder', he recommends doing so...

'For the scut and scat of cones in winter,
So rattle-skinned, so fossil-brittle...
But mostly for the swinging locks
Of yellow catkins.'

The alder, *Alnus glutinosa*, is a denizen of marshy woods, riverbanks and streams, and can be seen in many places throughout Suffolk. For me, it looks its best in the dead of winter, when its delicate, purple-tinted tracery of branches gives it a uniquely graceful appearance, peppered with countless tiny female cones and the first of the crimson male catkins. The effect is particularly enhanced when illuminated by the low, westerling sun during Suffolk's famous 'golden hour.'

Younger trees show a characteristic layered structure of lateral branches, which often become more meandering and irregular in mature specimens. Where alders are not growing along rivers or streams, they form alder woods, or carrs,

on wet or swampy ground – Wissington Carr in Babergh District being a notable example.

Celtic and Druidic Mythology

The alder has a rich tradition of reverence in Celtic and Druidic mythology, embodying themes of transformation, resilience, and the cycles of life. Given its preference for moist environments, Celtic mythology often associates the alder tree with the element of water, symbolising transformation and fluidity. Water is generally considered to be female in nature, representing emotional depth and the subconscious. The alder was seen as a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms, with themes of resurrection featuring prominently. There was even a belief that the first humans were created from the wood of the alder!

The trees were believed to be a gateway to the afterlife and were often planted near graveyards. The Druids used alder to create ceremonial objects, such as staffs and altars, which were essential for their rituals. The belief in the wood's protective qualities gave rise to its use for amulets and charms.

Among the numerous legends associated with the alder tree is the tale of the hero Cú Chulainn, who is said to have taken refuge under an alder tree during a battle, where he received guidance from the spirits of the forest. This emphasises the tree's role as a protector and a source of inspiration.

Fairy Magic and Folklore

In fairy magic, the alder is believed to be the secret doorway used by the fairy folk to pass from one realm to another. The fine twigs were traditionally used for making brooms and, indeed, by witches on their nocturnal travels! Furthermore, alder wood



Mature alders, at Newbourne Springs

Nick Nicholson

makes a good wand for wind and weather magic, for which purpose sticks should only be gathered from 'wind-blown' branches (according to the RHS, no less!)

Perhaps these themes were derived from the particular atmosphere of alder woods. In springtime, alder carrs can be mired in several inches of water, and were likely rarely visited by all but the most intrepid traveller. As such, they made ideal hideaways for fugitives, outlaws and bandits. The green dye which can be derived from the flowers was reportedly used to colour and therefore camouflage the garments of outlaws like Robin Hood, as well as the clothes of faeries, to conceal them from human eyes.

Given the alder carrs' wet terrain and the risk of meeting hidden undesirables, it is perhaps not surprising that the Irish considered it unlucky to pass an alder tree on a journey. On the other hand, it was said that alder leaves, placed in shoes at the start of a long journey, would cool the feet and prevent swelling. The Gaelic term for alder, *fearn*, crops up in place names in both Scotland and Ireland, indicating the widespread habitat of this native tree.

Traditional Uses and Properties

In medieval times, alder trees were believed to have healing properties. The bark and leaves of the tree were used to treat a variety of ailments, including toothaches and fever.

As befitting a tree which favours swampy areas or riversides, the alder's wood does not rot in wet conditions and indeed becomes as hard as stone when left immersed in water. According to treesforlife.org.com, people have made good use of this property since the Bronze Age at least, when crannochs (wooden strongholds on Scottish lochs) were built on rafts or piles of alder trunks. Such uses continued into the time of the Industrial Revolution when alder wood was favoured for the making of lock gates and other canal paraphernalia.

Interestingly, most of Venice is built on piles made of alder trunks. It always amazes me that, after all these centuries, this amazing place is still being supported solely by trunks of alder buried deep into the earth!

Out of water and outside generally, however, the timber rots easily, and so is generally considered unsuitable for building or fencing. Though not favoured as firewood or as a fuel for heating, it does make excellent charcoal, burning with an intense heat. It was therefore used by the Celts, for example, to forge their best weapons. Later the charcoal was used in the manufacture of

gunpowder, and because alder coppices easily, small plantations of the tree were often established next to such factories. Possibly owing to its property of being a poor conductor of heat, in England alder was the preferred wood for making clogs – and indeed, it seems this was also a favoured material used by the Dutch, with whom one would normally associate this footwear. Nowadays alder wood is mainly used for brush-backs and tool handles.

The Wood's Character and Superstitions

The living wood of alder is a pale colour but it turns a deep orange when cut. This gave the impression of bleeding and led to all sorts of negative superstitions about the tree. The deep colour fades with time to a paler, richer brown which was sought after by furniture makers, who gave alder wood its nickname of 'Scots mahogany.'

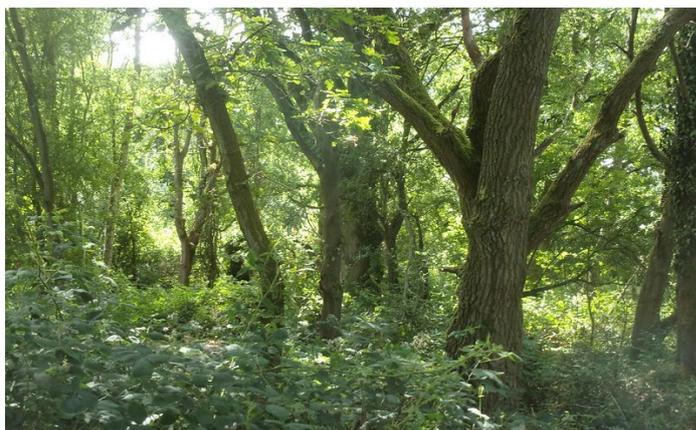
However, such furniture would need to be especially protected from woodworm, and a traditional remedy was placing an alder branch in cupboards as a lure. The parent woodworm beetle apparently preferred alder over any other wood as an egg-laying site.

Ecological Value

In addition to the ecological value of alder as a native tree, which has evolved within its ecosystem for many millennia, the nitrogen-fixing nodules on the alder's roots improve soil fertility. This makes the tree ideal for reclaiming degraded soils and industrial wastelands such as slag heaps.

A Personal Reflection

Two of my favourite areas of Suffolk locally are Bromeswell Green nature reserve and Newbourne Springs, both of which are damp woodlands where alders flourish and fine specimens can be seen. Two weeks into the new year, I was walking through Newbourne Springs, marvelling at the majestic, mature alders and younger trees in the more open areas, with the birdsong of robins, song thrushes, wrens and great tits ringing through the damp woodland, heralding the return of another Suffolk



Bromeswell Green

Gerry Morris

Burness the Benefactor of Melton Parish Rooms

Bryony Abbott, Local History Recorder



James Alexander Burness and Eliza Maria Gordon Bogue, Mrs Burness. These portraits have been donated to Woodbridge Museum by a descendant of the couple.

Due to the generosity of a Melton resident, the Burness Parish Rooms have been a striking part of the Melton street scene dating back to the first quarter of the twentieth century. The building is listed, constructed of Suffolk red brick with crow-stepped gables and ornate cornices above large windows. At the time of its opening, a local newspaper described *'A large and handsome Parish Room erected in Melton through the generosity of Mr James Alexander Burness of The Lodge, Melton at the request of the Rector. The building occupies an excellent site in Melton Street from which it is well recessed'*

James Alexander Burness (1837-1920) came to live in Melton around 1890, after a successful career in shipping and coal exporting. The company was a family firm started by his Scottish father, who owned an insurance underwriting agency for shipping companies. James was born in Stonehaven in Kincardineshire and came south when he was four. As a young man, he went into business with his father at their London offices based in Leadenhall Street. In 1865, James was married in Edinburgh to Eliza Maria Gordon Bogue

and they set up home in Greenwich, then in Kent, where they started their large family of nine children. Sadly two of their children died as infants and their son Alexander Gordon Burness died at the age of 21.

When Melton Lodge came on the market in 1883, James purchased the 176 acre estate at Auction for thirteen thousand pounds. The sales particulars describe a large mansion with a servants' building and separate gardener's cottage, a walled garden, greenhouse and stables. The property was enlarged to suit a growing family, including the kitchen garden and a new terrace, still a feature of the Lodge today. There are natural ponds fed by local springs and the red brick boundary wall along Yarmouth Road is listed in its own right.

James Alexander Burness was well regarded in the village and served as Churchwarden and in other roles on several committees, including as chairman of Melton School managers. He endured the tragic loss of four of his children; the Census entry for 1911 when he was aged 73, states that the family had five children still living, with eleven servants.

In 1918, at the age of 80, he retired from public life and died two years later in March 1920, leaving an estate of £213,998. He never received any Honours during his lifetime.

Under the terms of his Will, written in 1917, he made provision for a charitable trust *'to provide bread and coals for necessitous inhabitants of Melton forever'*. As a long-standing resident of the village, James Burness would have seen how the Suffolk countryside changed after the outbreak of the First World War, and its impact on the rural economy. Mechanisation had begun to take over and a slump in farming led to a time of low wages and unemployment. It would have been hard-going for many families in Melton who worked on the land.

The bequest of James Burness, with an endowment of £1,000 invested at two and a half percent in consols (government bonds issued at the end of WW1), has enabled the work of his charitable trust to continue to this day, benefiting Melton families in need through the Melton Trust since 1991, albeit no longer with *'bread and coals'*!

James Alexander Burness was buried in the churchyard at Melton Old Church. The Parishioners of Melton installed a new font cover at St. Andrew's Church, as a gift *'in his affectionate memory'* and an inscription on his memorial plaque at St. Andrew's Church reads: *'He never judged his fellow man unkindly or closed his ear to sorrow.'* It is a fitting tribute to one of Melton's great benefactors.



Burness Parish Rooms

The history of Reading Rooms such as the Burness Parish Rooms goes back to the political and social reforms of the late nineteenth century. They emerged as an important part of the movement concerning better public health, education and a drive for literacy.

Lending libraries were established in boroughs and towns, however rural villages were not well served and their populations had limited access to

resources for learning. Private philanthropists began to establish Reading Rooms, open to all and stocked with newspapers, books and periodicals. They were often encouraged by the church, who welcomed this trend as a more suitable alternative to drinking in the local pub.

The internal and external architecture of the Reading Room was intended to reflect high ideals and civic pride and the Burness Parish Rooms followed in this tradition. Opened in 1904 and constructed by Bilby Bros. based in Melton, the building was designed by the significant Ipswich architects Edward Fernley Bisshopp (1850-1921) and Henry Munro Cautley (1876-1959) who was Diocesan architect from 1911 until the 1950's. H. M. Cautley was a keen medievalist who published books about the parish churches of Norfolk and Suffolk and his designs echo the Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In sharp contrast to the simple cottages of most Melton residents, the interior of the Reading Room would have been a light and airy space with high ceilings and large windows. A narrow lobby led into an L-shaped room, divided by a central folding screen to accommodate different interests and give privacy, shelves and bookcases lining the walls. Heating was by an open fireplace, with its commemorative plaque over the mantelpiece.

No longer functioning as Reading Rooms, the Parish Rooms are still a well-used space in the village, run by a dedicated organising committee and popular with the community for exercise classes, events and meetings.

As a postscript to James Alexander Burness's commitment to village life, one of his descendants was also a benefactor: James's grandson Alexander Herbert Peter Hope, better known in the village as Peter Hope. He was the son of the youngest daughter in the family, Margaret Chisholm Burness who was married to George Meredyth Hope at St Andrew's Church in 1910.

Peter Hope was Chair of Melton Parish Council for thirty-three years, retiring in April 1991, and we have Peter to thank for saving Melton Old Church from dereliction, as one of the leading lights and founding members of the Melton Old Church Society in 1982, a registered charity still thriving today, with popular events and open days throughout the year and a community market each September.

With thanks to Mary Burgess, Local History Recorder, for her help with this article.

Opera for All - One Night Only

Nick Fowler, Opera Singer & Stage Director

Probably the most hotly debated event of the year in Woodbridge is also its best-kept secret. Opera Woodbridge, led by Nick Fowler and Lady Caroline Blois, is community opera at its finest, and it has been gathering a growing following since its inaugural production during Covid. Nick is regularly stopped in the Thoroughfare by fans trying to work out which opera he will bring to the stage that year — but he reveals nothing, not even to the staunchest supporters. ‘The secrecy started off being necessary, because I wasn’t certain we could pull it off, so keeping quiet gave us more leeway — we could change tack if something wasn’t working. But then it became part of the fun, so we now go to great lengths on the cover-up.’

Although each performance is wrapped in secrecy, Nick and his collaborators are already writing and re-writing scenes, discussing new songs and recruiting singers: all part of adapting a well-known opera into a one-off community event. There is something quite special about this - be there in person, or miss it entirely.

The germ of the idea began years ago, over dinner. A select group of opera loversbuffs would meet weekly at each other’s homes to watch an opera and discuss it over food and wine. Among them was Lady Caroline Blois – formerly of English National Opera – who had originally trained as an opera accompanist, and had hosted opera performances in her then home, Cockfield Hall, in Yoxford. Lady Caroline was then a member of Woodbridge Town Council, and when the idea of a community opera performance was mooted, she jumped at it, passionate about bringing the form to a wider public.

From Bandstand to Stage: A Company is Born



Opera Woodbridge in Elmhurst Park

When Covid struck, their plans were thrown into disarray. ‘Singing was one of the most dangerous things you could do, apparently — as was playing the flute. We were forbidden from both for fear of spreading the disease,’ Nick explains. The solution was to take the opera outdoors, to the fine bandstand at Elmhurst Park. A detailed plan was submitted to the Town Council and police, each audience member was allocated a marked space, numbers were capped at 120, and the production was trimmed to four singers and a string quartet.

The adaptation of Donizetti’s *L’Elisir d’amore* was a huge success, bringing joy to established opera lovers and curious newcomers alike. After that, there was no stopping them. The *Magic Flute* was chosen post-Covid as a deliberate explosion of energy, with children actively encouraged to run around and make a mess. The next production, *Die Fledermaus*, was again planned for Elmhurst Park — until the death of Queen Elizabeth II intervened. The bandstand became a site for floral tributes and all council events were cancelled. But Nick had wisely held Woodbridge Community Hall as a wet-weather reserve. Though technically owned by the Town Council, the hall is run by a committee that agreed the show could go on, provided it was dedicated to the Queen. It opened with a two-minute silence. It was, as Nick puts it, a blessing in disguise. ‘Opera doesn’t lend itself well to outdoor performance – in principle it’s unamplified. Outside, you need big speakers to do it justice.’

Community opera moved indoors from that point. Since then, Woodbridge has been graced with adapted versions of *The Barber of Seville*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and, last year, *Hansel and Gretel*. Nick translates and adapts each opera; Andrew Leach, conductor of Woodbridge Choral Society, has conducted every production. In fact, singers and players from The Woodbridge Choral Society and other local performers forms a vital part of the musical backbone, providing orchestra, chorus and actors, and Nick draws on professional singers he has worked with over the years for the solo roles, as well as giving opportunities to gifted local young performers.

Free, Funded and For Everyone

With each production costing around £10,000, funding is a constant challenge — made all the more pressing by the group’s founding principle that every performance must be free and accessible to the whole community. ‘We want to reach people who might never have been to an opera,’ says Nick.

‘You need a ticket, but it’s free. We do ask for a donation at the end, but it’s pay what you can afford.’

The involvement of Woodbridge Rotary Club is, therefore, invaluable. They provide sponsorship, manage audience seating, supply stewards and handle all financial administration — ensuring grants from the Town Council, Suffolk County Council and other sources are properly accounted for, leaving the creative team free to focus on the art.



The Barber of Seville

The company has many loyal supporters: some attend every single production, and a number of patrons donate thousands each year. One supporter sends a cheque for £25 annually. Every pound is equally cherished. Small budgets have, if anything, sharpened the company’s creativity. All props and many of the costumes are fashioned from found and recycled materials, lending a contemporary, environmentally aware edge to a classical work. For *Die Fledermaus* (a production was made possible in part by a donation from the late Caroline Page) all props and costumes were fashioned from found and recycled materials, lending a contemporary edge to a classical work.

The production of *Die Fledermaus* also honoured a long tradition of inserting comic or topical elements into the piece. *Fledermaus* adaptations — Pavarotti once made a surprise appearance at Covent Garden — with Nick writing an original song, ‘The Beautiful Green Deben’, an adaptation of the famous ‘Beautiful Blue Danube’, which later became part of the Save the Deben campaign. The late Caroline Page organised a donation from Suffolk County Council funds to facilitate the development and performance of the song.

The Next Generation: Jabberwocky and Beyond

For Nick Fowler - opera singer, stage manager, director and resident production manager at Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh - this is a deeply personal endeavour. He delights in the freedom that adaptation brings.

Engaging young people is central to Opera Woodbridge’s mission. Children from several of the primary schools in Woodbridge and beyond, and from both Farlingaye High School and Woodbridge School have taken part, and one boy has appeared in every opera so far in the role of a lawyer — a running joke that audiences now eagerly anticipate: a child materialising, seemingly at random, in a lawyer’s cloak.



Hansel and Gretel

Nick is enthusiastic and pragmatic in equal measure. ‘Kids get bored if they have to turn up to hundreds of rehearsals. For *Hansel and Gretel*, we only had two — and that actually captured the energy and excitement of the children perfectly. It’s hard to get young singers to learn lines they’ll never use again, so sometimes we allow them to sing from a songsheet. Not traditionally what happens in opera, but that’s the beauty of adaptation: anything goes.’

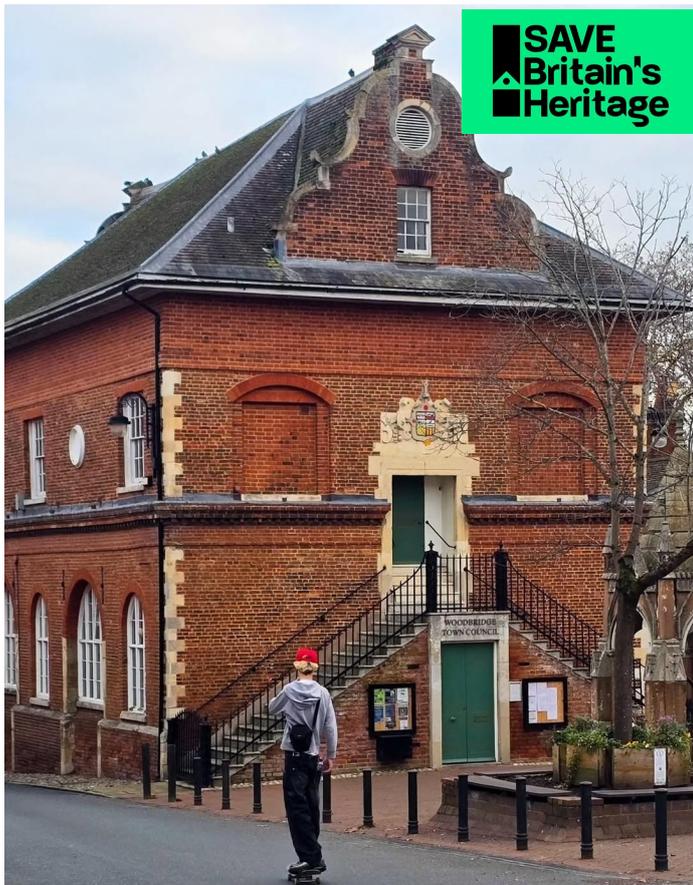
As a curtain-raiser to the main autumn production, Nick and his collaborators are working on something special this May — a smaller project he is unusually willing to discuss. In a fit of inspiration, Nick wrote the words for an adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem *Jabberwocky*, after a conversation with composer Ben Ponniah two years ago. ‘The idea is to turn the *Jabberwocky* on its head — to show that the creature isn’t frightening at all; it’s a myth conjured in children’s minds. I can’t wait to see the borogoves and slithy toves come to life.’

‘I want to show people, and young people children in particular, that opera is not a fussy thing for rich people. It can be great fun, genuinely silly — but underneath it’s also about human relationships.’ It is a delicate balance: pleasing the traditionalists while winning over first-timers and children. Opera Woodbridge somehow keeps managing both.

Look out for details about the Jabberwocky production this spring, and keep your ears open for whispers about the October production at the Woodbridge Community Centre.

Can Shire Hall Survive?

Siobhan Horner-Galvin, Editor



Shire Hall

Standing since 1575, the Shire Hall on Market Hill has served as a focal point of Woodbridge for over 400 years. Now, it is deteriorating and in dire need of a major renovation. A Grade I Listed building, the upper floor was once used for the Quarter and Petty Sessions – historical British courts – with Petty Sessions handling minor offences presided over by local magistrates, and Quarter Sessions dealing with more serious cases, also overseen by magistrates or Justices of the Peace, held four times

a year. In fact, if you take a look to the right and left of the doors as you walk up Market Hill, you'll still see the bars of the jails in which some criminals were held after sentencing, some awaiting their passage to Australia. The lower part of the building was used as a covered market; now it is the seat of the Woodbridge Town Council.

Joeske van Walsum, Chair of WMS, says 'It would be a tragedy to lose such an iconic building, full of history and an important feature of Woodbridge. Something must be done.' He has been instrumental in bringing the Shire Hall to the attention of SAVE– Save Britain's Heritage. SAVE played a leading role in preventing the beautiful Oxford Street Marks and Spencer building being torn down by developers. They are also responsible for the fight for an alternative scheme for Liverpool Street Station: the UK's busiest station and frequently used by many Woodbridge and Melton residents. Now, due to the efforts of the WMS SAVE has listed the Shire Hall as one that needs attention and protection. WMS is immensely proud of this. However, although the building is still standing, currently most of it is unusable, and this could soon become a very urgent matter. On the agenda for discussion, the Society is keen to hear from anyone interested in getting involved with saving this precious building.

On a further note, and linked with the Shire Hall, the WMS Committee is keen to see better recognition for the 16th century lawyer Thomas Seckford, who paid for the Shire hall to be built. It is well known that without him there would be no Woodbridge School nor Seckford Care and much more in the wider region. 'We think he deserves a statue, not just a Blue Plaque!' states Joeske Van Walsum.



The Woodbridge and Melton Society

The Woodbridge and Melton Society exists to improve our towns and enhance the well-being of all members of our community, now and for the future. Founded in 1951, for 75 years we have been working to preserve the history, heritage, character and environment of Woodbridge and now, Melton. We are a civic society with no political affiliation - free to get involved in campaigns and initiatives that others cannot. Becoming a member means joining a growing group of people who care deeply about where we live, committed to ensuring our community's future is as bright as its history is distinguished.

Join if you wish to:

1. Raise with the authorities local matters that concern you
2. Contribute to improving our built and natural environments
3. Discover the fascinating stories of the people that created our local area
4. Be part of a society with purpose and the ambition to make our town better for everyone
5. Leave a legacy by contributing to Woodbridge and Melton for future generations

The Aims of The Society are:

- * To raise with the authorities matters of concern to do with Woodbridge and Melton
- * To promote high standards of planning and architecture and monitor planning applications
- * To stimulate interest in their history and traditions
- * To publish a twice-yearly newsletter. (We welcome articles written by members—please contact Editor.)
- * To organise talks and visits

A registered charity (No. 1117073), The Society is able to claim gift aid on donations.

Our website:

www.woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk

Contact us: info@woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk

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COMPETITION ANSWER

In the previous issue, we ran a competition to win a wonderful painting by Helen Taylor. The answer to the competition is that the plant featured in this painting is angelica, an ingredient used in baking. Unfortunately, no one got the answer to the competition correct. So, the prize will be saved for our Diamond Anniversary Celebration on the 13th of June.

Decorating Cakes by Helen Taylor



WHAT'S ON IN WOODBRIDGE AND MELTON

A sample of the myriad events held in our towns in the coming months. Please see individual websites for full and up-to-date details and to book.

April

A Little Princess - Seckford Theatre, Woodbridge

17 April

A moving production by The London Ballet Company celebrating resilience, friendship, compassion, and the enduring power of imagination expressed through dance. <https://www.seckfordtheatre.org/whats-on/>

May

Frida Kahlo - The Riverside Cinema

24 May

A journey through the life of a true icon. Using letters Kahlo wrote as a guide, Exhibition on Screens's definitive film unlocks the secrets and symbolism contained within her art.

<https://www.theriverside.co.uk/programmes/frida-kahlo/>

June

Repair Café - St John's Church, Woodbridge

1 June

Need some shears sharpening? Got a coat that needs buttons? All manner of things can be fixed on the spot. Tea and cake and conversation too.

<https://transitionwoodbridge.org.uk/events/>

The Third Space Book Club - New Street Market, Woodbridge

3 June

Discussing GLORIOUS EXPLOITS by Ferdia Lennon with friends at Woodbridge Books.

75th Anniversary Celebrations

A spectacular day in planning ... check the website for details

13 June

www.woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk

July

Tide Mill Ghost Hunt - Woodbridge, Suffolk

25 July

Use ghost hunting equipment and much more with experienced mediums & paranormal investigators.

Séances, vigils, Ouija boards, glass divination and table tipping, automatic writing, dowsing and pendulums, metaphysical experiments.

<https://www.ghosthuntevents.co.uk/tide-mill.php>

August

Woodbridge Festival of Art & Music

Summer

A community-run festival showcasing ambitious and diverse international line-ups, encouraging local talent and emerging artists to share a platform with established acts.

www.woodbridgefestival.com

IF YOU HAVE AN EVENT TO PROMOTE GET IN TOUCH WITH US

info@woodbridgeandmeltonsociety.org.uk