

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 1999

Visit to the River and Rowing Museum

Wargrave Local History Society's May meeting was a visit to the new *River and Rowing Museum*, in Henley. The tour of the various galleries was preceded by a talk on the background history of the museum by its curator, Jane Bowen.

Jane told us that when she began working for the museum, as its first employee, in 1994 there was no building and no collection to put in it - just 4 small items. The site was part of a car-park, with rubbish tipped on it. All that existed was a lot of enthusiasm from the trustees. At this early stage, planning permission was needed to allow building on the site. The plan was that the museum should not stand out, but is hidden by poplar trees, and it is constructed of green oak and stainless steel designed to mellow.

Building began in 1995, with the structure raised on concrete pillars, so that it would not impede the flow of water in time of flood - and to keep the collection dry. The wisdom of this became apparent in the following February, when the river came over the tow-path, and covered part of the site. The building above these pillars is unusual - the 'ground' floor is mainly open and glazed, so outsiders can see in, and visitors can see the river, but the first floor is almost entirely enclosed without windows. This is done so that the ultra-violet light, humidity and temperature levels can be controlled to protect the archives inside. The main galleries are in the first phase of the building, with a second part housing a further gallery, additional storage, and facilities for school parties. Despite not winning any funding from lottery sources, both phases were completed in time for the official opening.

The collection of items to be displayed was, meanwhile, proceeding. Interactive displays were built, and memories of people who lived or worked on the river, or were involved with rowing etc, were recorded. Just 12 months before the museum opened, the collection began to be moved in and the displays arranged. On the glazed lower floor is the Reach Gallery. This cannot include the historic or precious exhibits, but gives an introduction to the area and the river, particularly for non-locals, with models and sound stories of Henley people. Upstairs, visitors first enter the Rowing Gallery. Apart from many models, and working displays on the structure of rowing craft, this gallery includes many boats in the roof space - historic, famous, or vessels with an interesting story. Smaller exhibits include features on the Henley Royal Regatta and well known personalities from the rowing world. The next main gallery that visitors see is that devoted to the Thames. Following from the source to the sea, this shows many aspects and features of the river, set out in several short sections. Included here are examples of archaeology found in the river, such as a dug-out wooden boat, some 1500 years old, to a feature on the Thames Barrier. Crossing the bridge to the third major gallery, there is a line set out to show the varying width of the river along its length - the areas likely to flood then become apparent. The third gallery relates the history of Henley and the surrounding area, with a steam launch as its centre piece, and

displays on many aspects of local life - commerce, transport, battles etc. The museum also has two smaller areas for temporary displays on specific subjects.

The museum is well worth a visit for anyone interested in rowing, or in the River Thames, or the Henley area. If you are interested in all three, allow plenty of time, - the collection is much, much more than those original 4 items, or even those noted here.
