

IPSWICH BUILDING PRESERVATION TRUST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2021

‘A 21st century building for Suffolk Archives’

A talk by Kate Chantry, the strategic manager of the Suffolk Archive Service, reviewed by Bob Allen

Kate described the tremendous range of services and activities provided across Suffolk by the County Council’s Archive Service, which links with both national and local groups and resources. The new building in Ipswich, opened in September 2021 by the Duke of Gloucester, is very much more than a building. It epitomises the aim to make what was previously known as the Record Office fit for our century, attracting new audiences and users, especially young people.

The scheme was funded from a range of local and national sources, including the Lottery.

Across Suffolk we are fortunate in having three branches open to the public in Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, and Lowestoft. All three have received investment. The Bury centre has been re-roofed and in Lowestoft the Search Room has been refurbished with a display of the large-scale Ordnance Survey Map which has attracted considerable interest. In Ipswich the move to the new site has enabled the Gatacre Road buildings to be used as a base for Eastern Angles Theatre Company and for further use by the County Council.

Our new Ipswich building now houses literally miles of material including maps, photographs, digital and audio sources, together with printed materials. The earliest deposit is the Ipswich Charter of 1119. All these resources are housed in conditions which secure them against damage and decay. The collections are continually being updated. The aim is to ‘preserve the now’, and recent additions provide evidence of Suffolk experiences of Covid and responses to ‘Black Lives Matter’.

The building is shared with the University of Suffolk who make extensive use of the seminar and lecture accommodation as well as the research facilities. Other users include schools, and many individuals and groups with specific areas of interest. Kate hopes that younger visitors will make a strong connection with the centre and come to see it as a lifetime resource.

Outreach is developed through the work of two Community Engagement Officers. This includes creative involvement through dance, performance, historic walks, exhibitions and displays. In Tattingstone a refurbished telephone box provides information about the creation of Alton Water, and other projects have illuminated the work of the Women’s Land Army and have explored the Suffolk coastal fishing heritage through drama and music. As the Heritage Lottery funding comes to an end in September 2022 Kate aims to attract sponsorship and other funding to sustain and further develop imaginative and creative projects to promote the identity of Suffolk and help people to own and engage with their past.

The building itself sits on a sloping site that once housed the Ipswich Social Settlement. In recent years it has been used for car parking. Some mature trees had to be felled, and an existing building was demolished. The site adjoins conservation areas to east and west. Construction lasted from 2018 to hand-over in July 2020. The facilities had to be multi-purpose, and this concept dominates the organic layout of the interior, with its welcoming street flowing to areas which provide different intriguing experiences, from the café and shop to the lecture theatre, search facilities and strong room. The John Blatchly Local Studies Library commemorates the work of this noted local historian. The layout opens up views of the dock from the foyer and café and at the rear there is an attractive garden and paved

area. Externally the various functions are expressed in different materials reflecting Suffolk buildings, such as polychrome brickwork and Suffolk church clerestories.

Kate was keen to emphasize the availability of the building for public use – even performances could be staged including circus skills and dance so the possibilities are endless. The shop will become an outlet for all kinds of products including those from local designers. We are invited to visit the website to explore the amazing potential of our new centre. It will clearly make a tremendous contribution to the town and county, and it is hoped that it will attract worldwide interest and be a magnet within the regenerated dock and university campus. The concept moves way beyond the traditional view of a record office with elderly scholars poring over dusty tomes to a centre that is truly a hub for the whole community, learning from the past while looking to the present and future.

Kate's talk was detailed and comprehensive. It was very warmly received by those attending the AGM.

Bob Allen