ANNUAL REPORT 2025

MISSION AND PUBLIC BENEFIT

Topsham Museum is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) established in 2020 to succeed the Topsham Museum Society (TMS). Assets and members were transferred to the CIO and the mission remained the same: to advance the education of the public by providing and managing a public museum and collecting, recording and displaying objects and information pertaining to the local history, flora and fauna of Topsham and the Exe Estuary.

Thanks to committed volunteers we have done our best to give effect to that mission during a frustrating year when, as described below, we were not able to open to the public. In summary, the ways we have done this are:

- Taking forward a programme of outreach activities
- Arranging a regular programme of lectures
- Regular activities for children
- Supporting local and family historians and others undertaking research
- Using a facility in central Topsham for small temporary exhibitions, and utilising space at the Custom House in Exeter
- Acquiring a second redundant telephone kiosk and working with local residents to maintain it as a book exchange
- Installation of maps and information boards

BUILDING AND LEASE

These issues have dominated discussions by the trustees. The building and land occupied by the Museum were left to Exeter City Council (ECC) by the late Dorothy Holman in 1993, and the CIO occupies the premises under a lease from ECC, due to terminate at the end of March 2026. Since 2022, the Museum has paid rent and reimbursed ECC for the building insurance. Because the building was not available for public opening in 2025, we agreed with ECC that no rent would be payable.

Last year we reported that ECC had agreed to fund a project to replace the render on the Lower Shapter Street side of the building and had started to identify other issues that needed to be addressed. Regrettably all work was paused in early July 2025 and communications with ECC became very difficult. Subsequently work re-started in January 2026 but it was made clear that nothing beyond the Lower Shapter Street work would be taken forward, whilst ECC continued to assess the total cost of the project and determine how the costs would be met. We were very

relieved when a meeting in July 2025 with the Head of Commercial Assets and the Principal Estates Surveyor seemed to signal a return to regular communications. There was little other good news, not least because ECC concluded they needed clarification of the legal basis on which they own the building. This issue is now the subject of an application to the High Court, and we do not know the timetable for the determination of that outcome. Meanwhile, although ECC officials have indicated that they are preparing a paper for Councillors on all the options open to them, we have been given a reasonably clear indication that there are no immediately available sources of funding to complete the remaining works. This causes us considerable concern because of the risk of further deterioration in the fabric of the building, particularly the 1680s period house, which we believe to be the only publicly-accessible property of a similar age and nature in the care of the Council. We have indicated that we are prepared to consider the possibility of a Community Asset Transfer of the building, but the Council are currently not engaging with us on this issue.
In the light of these developments, we have not taken forward lease negotiations, and the current lease will roll forward until the position becomes clearer.

VISITORS
Although the Museum was closed for the whole 2025 season we were very pleased that over 3200 people supported our various outreach events under the banner 'Full Ahead'.

OUTREACH
Our volunteers have responded to the closure of the Museum by offering outreach activities. We are grateful to the Central Garage for allowing us to use their Fore Street window for regularly changing displays, using items from the Museum's collections. Watermeadow Grange continues to offer a venue for a monthly coffee morning and museum display which is open to their residents and the public.
EXHIBITIONS
Our plan for our temporary exhibition for 2025 had involved working with The Arts Society Topsham to identify 18-19th-century paintings of the Exe Estuary. We were delighted when the Custom House on Exeter Quay agreed to host a virtual display of some of the paintings in November, with members of the Topsham Flood Map group also exhibiting works of art they had created.
An art exhibition was staged at St Margaret's Church in early April and the Tea Room team provided catering.
Although not strictly an exhibition, in October we organised a Table-top Museum at the Matthews Hall. Twenty people exhibited their personal collections which included: a detailed family history, a collection of toast racks, West End theatre

memorabilia, hand-made puppets and even vintage lingerie. The event attracted close to 200 visitors, and we may repeat it in 2026.

COMMUNITY COMMITMENT

The telephone box outside St Margaret's Church continues to be used for exhibitions and information for residents and visitors. We were very pleased to work with local residents to acquire a second redundant telephone box on the Strand. The Market House Trust kindly provided a grant to enable the box to be refurbished, and it was formally opened on 13 November as a book exchange, and to provide information on the museum.

We have continued to provide the popular Topsham Trails leaflets which are available free of charge at various points in Topsham for the benefit of visitors to the town. In addition, free walking tours of Topsham were offered twice weekly by volunteer guides between May and September.

Last year we reported on slow progress in developing maps and heritage information boards for key locations in the town. Due to the determination of one of our trustees and financial support from the Market House Trust, East of Exe and Rodney Spiller, this project was brought to a successful conclusion. The maps were erected in November 2025 and on 7 December our patron, the Earl of Devon, formally opened the information boards and the accompanying QR trail.

MUSEUM GARDENS

Because of the building work, the team of gardening volunteers has had limited access to the main garden throughout the year. That said, essential cutting back, grass cutting and tidying took place when possible and the yew arch was kept in good condition.

The main focus was the riverside garden where the challenge was keeping the plants going during the hot, dry summer. Thought is being given to the introduction of more drought-tolerant plants. The riverside garden is very popular both with visitors and local residents, and is used for events such as the children's' Christmas trail.

LECTURES

We continued with our programme of summer and winter lectures. During 2025 we held three evening lectures in January, March and November. These were given respectively by Val Maxfield, Todd Gray and Ian Mortimer and attracted good audiences. The topics covered included local Roman excavations, the impact of the Second World War and an amazing survey by Ian of the A to Z of English history.

During the spring and summer, we held five lunchtime lectures covering a range of subjects from Jane Austen in the South-West, through the advent of the railways, the 'middling people' of Exeter, paintings of the Exe estuary from Ray Balkwill and

a fascinating explanation of hoards and local discoveries from Tom Cadbury of RAMM.

MEMBERSHIP

It is very pleasing that, notwithstanding the museum being closed, most members renewed their membership in 2025 and some others joined. At end of the year numbers were as follows:

Annual members	238
Life members	49
Total	287

All members received the 2025 edition of Topsham Times, and we are grateful to the editor, Cathy Maguire, and to Ned Hoste for pre-press production.

It was unfortunate that an event for members planned to take place in the riverside garden in September had to be cancelled because of the weather forecast. In the event, the weather was as bad as predicted! It is hoped that the event can be rearranged, alongside other events planned for 2026.

COLLECTIONS

Most of the furniture from the period house is currently in secure storage at a venue in Exeter, with costs being covered by ECC. We are concerned, however, that the items have been in storage for longer than anticipated with no end currently in sight.

As part of the building works, the boiler was inspected and condemned and there is currently no gas heating in the Museum. This put items still in the building at risk, and so five electric heaters were installed in the sail loft. Some of the display cases were cleared and removed, and the library and the document and photographic collections were transferred into the sail loft where the temperature and humidity conditions can be kept constant. The picture collection has been repositioned, and the administration files have also been moved to the sail loft.

All items on loan from RAMM were removed by them in November. We are also grateful to RAMM for providing storage for our textile collection and our unframed artworks. We have worked with a furniture curator from the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) to determine how to deal with their items held on loan. The original plan had been for them to be returned to the V&A, but we are delighted to report that negotiations were successfully concluded with Powderham Castle, and the items are due to be moved there in March 2026.

We are very grateful to the teams of volunteers who work each week to check and repack documents, photographs, and the objects in our reserve collection. Every item has been photographed and will be added to the database. This work has enabled us to weed out duplicates and assess items which do not fit with our collections policy. The trustees have agreed to deaccession several items.

We hold 140,000 objects, documents and photographs in the collection. There were no accessions in 2025, but items have been offered and will be accessioned in 2026.

SECRET GARDENS

In June we held our biennial Secret Gardens of Topsham. We were very fortunate with the weather, and it turned into a highly successful day. Over 1500 tickets were sold, giving access to 15 gardens: we are very grateful to residents who opened their gardens. There was a plant stall, a book stall and two refreshment venues were set up around the town. Large quantities of cake and cream teas were served by teams of museum volunteers.

VOLUNTEERS

As a volunteer-led and run organisation, volunteers are the lifeblood of the museum, and we benefit from having a good reputation as a place to volunteer. Despite the museum being closed, volunteers have still been busy in activities reported elsewhere in this report. A new coordinator for the museum lecture series brings a solid academic background and network; and the finance team are actively involved in activities that generate donations or sales. The IT and publicity teams have continued to work hard, and the maintenance team have continued to do what they can within the constraints of the building.

Most of our volunteers are normally room stewards or tea room assistants: none has resigned, but we anticipate needing to attract new volunteers when we are eventually able to re-open.

We continue to have regular enquiries from potential volunteers, mostly from students wanting volunteer hours to turn academic knowledge into actual museum experience, but also from people with administrative and management experience.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

The team of volunteers who support children's activities have had a busy year. They have run monthly Storytime sessions at Watermeadow Grange, and it has been particularly good to see residents beginning to engage with these sessions. From April to October monthly sessions are also run in the field belonging to The Goat Walk Land Trust. These sessions enable children to engage with the natural world and are Makaton signed to increase accessibility. With the co-operation of local businesses, a Nursery Rhyme Trail was established and ran throughout the summer and up to the October half term. The team also worked with Love Topsham, particularly on the Christmas trail, with a family event in the Riverside garden.

RESEARCH

An invigorated research team started work in 2025. Individual volunteers have identified topics of particular local interest, and we hope these projects will come to fruition in 2026. Training on use of the Museum database has taken place.

PUBLICITY

It has been very important to ensure that events are publicised to a wide audience. It has also been essential to ensure regular communications with members and volunteers during these challenging times.

2025 saw the launch of new branding for the Museum. It has been used successfully in promoting a range of events from Secret Gardens and lectures to children's activities and the Christmas market.

We use a range of methods of communications: national and local press, social media (Instagram and Facebook), and monthly newsletters for volunteers and members.

MAINTENANCE

The maintenance team have been liaising with the contractors on practical issues, including assessment of storage.

TRUSTEES

The Annual General Meeting was held on 30 April 2025 and saw the following elected or confirmed: Jenny Ellis (Chair), Graham Norwood (Vice-Chair), Gill McLean (Secretary), John Claxton (Treasurer), Jan Lawson, Emma Laws, Roger Ascough, Heather Kay, Will Atkinson and Jeff Nicholls. During the year Roger Ascough stood down from the Board, and John Claxton resigned from the formal position as Treasurer but continued to undertake the role pending recruitment of a successor. His willingness to do this provided invaluable support for Secret Gardens and we are very grateful to John for doing this.

In 2021, Rachel Nichols BEM became President of the Museum and has continued to make a major contribution, both in this role and as the head of collections. We are very grateful to her.

MANAGEMENT

Trustees set the strategic direction for the Museum and monitored its delivery, while day-to-day operations remain overseen by a Management Team of volunteers. The Management Team, chaired by Simon Briscoe, has worked hard throughout the year to deal with issues in very trying circumstances.

Topsham Museum Trading Ltd (TMT), formed in 2007 to administer trading activities, is now a wholly owned subsidiary of Topsham Museum. Its activities include the Tea Room, Museum shop, fundraising, group visits and special events.

In 2025, TMT donated profits of £29,751 to the Museum. A significant portion of this was attributable to the success of Secret Gardens. The 2025 directors of TMT were Stevie Barrett, Fi Douglas, Graham Norwood and Jenny Ellis.
The Museum has no paid staff but engages a self-employed cleaner.
The Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM) provides invaluable professional assistance: Tom Cadbury is our Curatorial Adviser.

FINANCIAL
The accounts for 2025 form part of this report. The accounts have been examined independently by Bill Nichols and approved by the Trustees who particularly wish to thank the Treasurer and those supporting him for their invaluable and dedicated work maintaining the Museum accounts.

RESERVES
The trustees maintain financial reserves for unforeseen circumstances such as dips in income or significant unscheduled expenditure. The approach also reflects annual expenditure, most of which is incurred in the first quarter of the year when pre-opening maintenance is undertaken and the shop re-stocked. This has been an unusual year with both income and expenditure reduced. Given current uncertainties the trustees have not reviewed the reserves policy this year.
On 31 December 2025, cash in the General Fund stood at £213,000 (£206,833 in 2024) and in the Designated Fund £79,000 (£87,116 in 2024). The Designated Fund, also known as the Legacies and Gifts Fund, was created in 2011 from legacies and gifts received with the intention that these funds should not be used for day-to-day expenditure, but should be reserved for special projects.

OUTLOOK FOR 2026

WORK ON THE BUILDING
As I write this report the outlook remains very uncertain. This is particularly disappointing as 2026 is the 40th anniversary of the Museum opening, and we had expected to be up and running and welcoming visitors. We expect ECC to complete the first phase of the work on the Lower Shapter Street side of the building, and to remove the scaffolding on that side. Thereafter we have no clear idea of what is likely to happen. The trustees are keen to pursue the possibility of a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) but have no clear steer from ECC on this possibility.

LEASE
Our lease expires on 31 March 2026. We have agreed to delay renewal negotiations with ECC until the terms of building ownership are determined. The lease will roll over under the provisions of the Landlord and Tenant Act.

EXHIBITION
This is another area of uncertainty. At the time of writing, we have no accessible exhibition space in the Museum building. The exhibitions team is exploring alternatives, working alongside the Topsham Art Group and others. Meanwhile, we will be able to continue using the Central Garage window for Museum displays.

RESEARCH
The research team is expected to meet regularly and to complete some pieces of research during the year.

LECTURES
A full series of six summer and three winter lectures is planned for 2026, and we are grateful to JJ Jacques for taking on the role of lectures co-ordinator.

OUTREACH
We plan to continue outreach activities while the building remains closed.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES
In addition to the existing work with Love Topsham, the team is planning to develop links with the group who organise the annual Charter Day events. They will also be encouraging links with other teams in the Museum to deliver events and they plan to develop a bike trail for older children.

Jenny Ellis CB
Chair of Trustees
March 2026