

# The Discoverer

Downham Market & District Heritage Society Reg. Charity No. 1154267

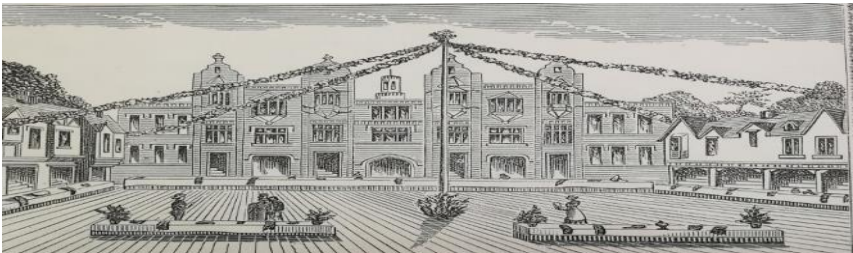


St Winnold on the Downham Market town sign



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Find out more about this picture, from May 1888, on page 9

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## Editorial

Welcome to our Spring newsletter! There are some great events coming up to enjoy in the warmer, sunnier (hopefully!) weather.



In March we are hosting a 'Behind the Scenes at the Museum' open day. Come along and find out about the great work our volunteers do to ensure the museum and its events run smoothly. More information about the event is on page 3, whilst on page 4 Marion Batt talks about volunteering.

March also sees the annual St Winnold Fair, which has been moved to a Saturday this year to attract more people. Read our preview of the day and about how the museum is involved.

In this issue you can also find out about horseracing in Downham, a Rustic Maypole Bizarre from 1888, and in our alphabet series Peter Thorpe talks about Downham's Bridge and his experiences.

We receive quite a few research requests at the museum, on page 11 Ron Cansdale talks about some of the requests we have helped with. Ron also supplies the newsletter with lots of fascinating snippets of history, so in the next few issues we'll share them in a 'Did You Know?' feature. We start with the intriguing death of Mary Beeten, who is thought to have spontaneously combusted!

As always, please do send us any comments you have about the newsletter and let us know if there's anything you would like to see covered in future editions.

Enjoy Spring!

Maria

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Don't forget to like/follow us on our social media accounts and get up to date news and photos.



[Discover Downham](#)



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## Noticeboard

### Membership Renewal

A reminder that the deadline for membership renewal is April 1<sup>st</sup>. The subscription remains at £10, and can be paid by cash or cheque. We are grateful for your subscriptions as we are dependent on the income and help from our members.

Please send your membership forms and payment to; ***Membership Secretary, Discover Downham, The Old Fire Station, 30 Priory Road, Downham Market, Norfolk PE38 9JS.***

Thank you!

### 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Heritage Society. To mark the anniversary, it would be lovely to include what the society means to its members in the next newsletter.

If you have any anecdotes, stories, memories, experiences and photos of the society you would like to share, please email them to me at Discover Downham ([info@discoverdownham.org](mailto:info@discoverdownham.org)) and we'll select a few to include.

### Help with May Carnival stall

We will again be taking part in the May Carnival on May 25<sup>th</sup>, with a float and a stall. Many of our volunteers are involved with the float and are aiming to win top prize for the second year in a row

This means we are short of volunteers to help with the setting up and running of our stall. If you can spare any time to help with our stall, we would be very grateful. Please email us at [info@discoverdownham.org](mailto:info@discoverdownham.org) or call us on 01366 384428 if you would like to help.

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### **Behind the Scenes at the Museum**

You are invited to join us for our Behind the Scenes at the Museum open day on 24<sup>th</sup> March.



## **Discover Downham**

**The Old Fire Station**  
Priory Rd, Downham Market, PE38 9JS  
[www.discoverdownham.org.uk](http://www.discoverdownham.org.uk)  
[info@discoverdownham.org.uk](mailto:info@discoverdownham.org.uk)  
01366 384650

# **BEHIND THE SCENES AT THE MUSEUM**

## **OPEN DAY**

## **TUESDAY MARCH 24<sup>TH</sup>**

## **10am - 12.30pm**

Come and meet the friendly volunteer team.

guide and there will be a whiteboard showing the variety of work we do.

Refreshments will be available in our café. Whilst enjoying your cuppa, our volunteers will explain the variety of events we hold to help raise funds for the centre.

Come along and meet our friendly, knowledgeable volunteers, who will be delighted to show you the work that goes on behind the scenes to make the museum a success.

Discover what happens to artefacts donated to the museum, how displays are put together, the publicity and media work we do, what stewarding involves, admin work in the office and general maintenance of the museum.

You will also be able to pick up a

#### 4. **Volunteering at Discover Downham – Marion Batt**

Discover Downham has a great number of volunteers, who are passionate about keeping the centre open for local residents and tourists to the town.

We all put hours of work in and in return have fun and the sense of achievement of keeping history alive.

We need volunteers in different areas because it is a bit like running a small business - people who can maintain the building and clean the floors, use the computer, office jobs, publicity and putting up posters, wrapping artefacts and storing them correctly and making teas and coffee.

Whilst we are here to provide a Heritage centre, we have to raise our own money to keep it going and so we run lots of events to get an income.

At our behind-the-scenes event on March 24<sup>th</sup>, I will be showing how information on artefacts are entered onto the computer so that we have a record to refer to when we want to find the item in store. Each item has a unique number and some detail about what it is, how it was used and its age.

I am one of four people who data enter on a Tuesday morning, but we are always looking for more people to help because of the constant number of donated items we get.



**Volunteers  
needed**

for

**Stewarding  
Administration  
Design and display  
General duties  
Multi-tasking**

Apply  
Email... [info@discoverdownham.org.uk](mailto:info@discoverdownham.org.uk)  
Discover Downham, The Old Fire Station,  
Priory Road, Downham Market, PE38 9JS

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***If you are interested in becoming part of our volunteer team please contact us via email, phone, or speak to us at our open day.***

### Horseracing in Downham Market - Marion Batt

Recently, I was asked to search the database to find out where a framed poster advertising horse racing in Downham Market was stored.



I regularly go horse racing and am a member at Fakenham so was particularly pleased to see this unique artefact as I didn't realise Downham Market had its own racetrack.

It opened in 1837, the year Queen Victoria ascended the throne and was sited near Crow Hall Park which is now where the traffic lights are on London Road.

From this only poster we have at the centre, dated 1853, you will see the six races which took place on Wednesday 27th July.

The race meeting was an annual event off and on until 1866, each race being two circuits of the mile-long track. The horses and riders' colours had to be entered the day before racing at the Queens Head Inn in Bridge Street (now The Lighthouse TV shop). The prize money is a bit different these days!

Downham Market has a long history with horses, having had the largest horse Fair in the country in its day.

Each year in March, the town celebrates the Fair on the feast day of St Winnold.

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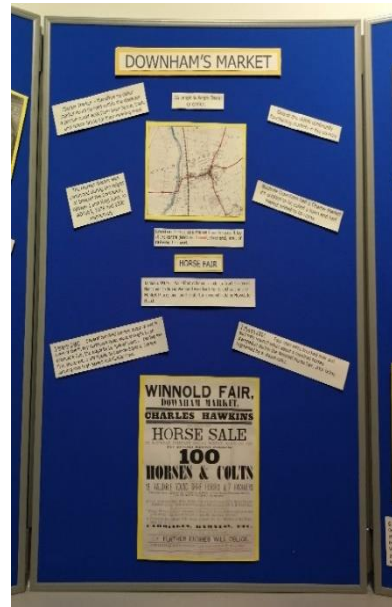
## St Winnold Fair

Downham's annual St Winnold fair takes place on Saturday March 21<sup>st</sup>.

Usually held during the week, the fair has been moved to a Saturday this year in the hope that more people will be able to attend and discover the fascinating history of the St Winnold's Day Horse Fairs.

The day will start with a breakfast held at the Town Council offices, followed by a parade at 9:15.

This year Discover Downham will have it's own exhibition at the fair, telling the story of the fairs from it's archive collection. The exhibition will also be on display at the museum for the next few months.



Find out how a sixth century Celtic saint, who founded a monastery in Brittany, came to be linked with the town and immortalised on the town sign.

Also discover how an ancient horse fair, said to be the largest in Europe became such an important part of Downham's trading links in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The tradition was revived in 2004 and has been part of Downham's events calendar ever since.

This year the council have also added a medieval style fair to the programme. Weather permitting (!) it is hoped that both the exhibition and fair will be situated on the town square from 10 am to 2pm. If the weather is unkind these will both move in to the town hall.

The event will be covered on our social media channels throughout the day, so if you are unable to attend keep an eye on our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages for photos and updates. There will also be a review of the day in the next newsletter.



## **B is for...Bridge**

### **The Bridge over the River Ouse – Peter Thorpe**

In 1877 an iron bridge was built, and opened in February 1879 by Sir William Bagge costing £3000, this replaced a wooden toll bridge owned by the Lords of Bardolph which was the gateway to the Bardolph Fen.

By 1938 a new temporary bridge was built alongside the iron bridge, due to the increasing traffic, heavy lorry's and the road becoming a main thoroughfare from Norfolk to the East Midlands. Due to money constraints the bridge didn't become permanent until 1964.

Traffic had increased again at an alarming rate by the 1960's, as by this time holiday makers were travelling from the industrial heartlands of the East Midlands to the Norfolk coast during the summer. The congestion raised serious concerns as to the safety of the wooden bridge, it was such a worry that the old iron bridge was checked over and pressed into service to carry one way traffic with a weight limit of I believe five tons along with the wooden bridge.

Another issue was the steady increase in leisure boats using the tidal Ouse to get from the fen waterways to King's Lynn. Though the Relief Channel by this time was cut, it did not originally have lock gates at each end to allow boats to pass through as it was only designed as a pressure relief of flood water. On two occasions I personally recall seeing boats being caught out and trapped by the speed of the incoming tide under the bridge and seriously damaged.

The severe winter of 1963 saw large ice flows trapped under and around the wooden legs of the bridge, forming an artificial dam restricting the tide from flowing in and out properly giving cause to possible flooding.

For the new bridge to be constructed designs were drawn up for a new approach road from the Salters Lode direction to pass behind the cottages known as Farthing Square and give a straight approach to the new bridge. The bridge was to be built at such an angle that at first the traffic would follow the present road round to the railway station, but in the future when funds were available a bypass running from the A10 would come down

over the railway to St Johns industrial Park. The new bridge was to be built over the relief channel and onto the new bridge over the Ouse.

During the construction of the Ouse bridge the old iron bridge of 1877 was taken down and the old wooden bridge was used for two-way traffic with a weight limit of I believe five tons. I remember this very well as at the time I lived at Nordelph and went to Downham Secondary Modern School (now Downham Academy).

We were bussed to school, and after picking up from Stowbridge, Barroway Drove, Nordelph and Salter Lode, the bus would be too full and overweight for the bridge. We would have to disembark, walk over the temporary foot bridge and re-embark on the other side to continue our journey to school.

In the construction of the new bridge, which is made up of two concrete pillars within the river, the concrete beams approximately 70 feet long spanned between the banks and pillars. These beams were made at Lenwade just outside of Norwich and transported by road by Pickfords Transport using special chassieless trailers. The concrete beam would act as the chassie as it rested one end on the tractor unit and the other end on a steerable bogie steered by a second operator. This meant it was able to manoeuvre around tight turns.

This was brought to bear as these beams were brought through Downham town, before any bypass of Downham had occurred and the A10 passed along the high street and the A1122 came straight up Bridge Street meeting at the Clock.

Imagine these large long beams coming down Bexwell Road to Cannon Square (traffic lights today) turning left along the high street to the clock then right down Bridge Street and on to the site at Downham West. This just shows how tight the turn was and all this with two-way traffic through the town.

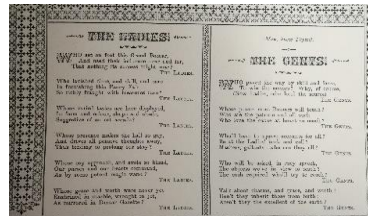
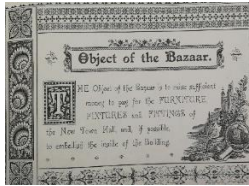
The new bridge was completed in 1964, it weighs 8400 tons, is 223 feet long and cost £75000. After completion the old wooden bridge was taken down and all evidence of the old bridges removed.

# A Rustic Village May Pole Bizarre

Our archive holds a copy of a fascinating 'descriptive guide' from May 1888, advertising a 'Rustic Village May Pole Bizarre'.

The town centre event was held to raise funds for the 'fixtures and fittings of the new town hall'

Here is a selection of pages taken from the guide.



## Museum Enquiries – Ron Cansdale

The enquiries we normally handle concern Downham Market and surrounding parishes. Those about a person's family tree, or the history of the house in which they currently live would be subject to the payment of a basic research fee. Subjects of general interest, like the history of Scouting in Downham, or an account of the Downham races, would not.

The Heritage Society is lucky in that it can access a unique reference source, consisting of an index running from circa 1800 to 1945, of items in the local newspapers relating to Downham.

A large proportion of enquiries relate to people or buildings in the town, but we also deal with identifying old photographs. We have recently been able to place one shot of the Market Place to within five years, as it was possible to establish that a shop shown in the background was only in business for that amount of time.

Another photo of a local military unit could be dated because whilst the majority of the men shown were wearing what was known as Full Dress, others wore the khaki Service Dress and slouch hats issues at the time of the Boer War. Similarly, we know that the photo of a group of policemen must have been taken after a certain year by the badges they wear.

We have also been able to correct captions on photos. A picture of a local Police Sergeant claims to be that of a certain named individual, but a structure on the background is known to date from 1921, by which time this man had been promoted to inspector!

A recent enquiry which involved some interesting research concerned the old Toll House at Salters Lode/ This meant finding out when tolls were first collected and why, and a partial list of the men employed to do so.

Another was from a relation of a former teacher at the old school in Paradise Road, which led to an abstract of its records being made. We found that a teacher at the school had been convicted of murder in another part of the country, whilst two other members of staff drowned in a boating accident in Victorian times, and a schoolmistress was thought to have killed herself.

## **Did you know?**

### **The Death of Mary Beeten – Ron Cansdale**

The Lynn Advertiser reported on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1859 what appears to have been a case of spontaneous combustion in Downham Market.

Mary Beeten, the widow of local property owner Edmund Beeten of Salamanca Place who died in 1849, had very recently moved from a house on the Wimbotsham Road, where she had been living alone. Mary moved in to her daughter in law's home in Paradise Lane and had last been seen at noon by Mrs Vincent, but less than an hour later she had been found burnt almost to a cinder although her family had been in the room below and had not noticed any burning smell.

Quite apart from these strange circumstances there is a subsidiary puzzle to consider. The implication is that Mrs Vincent was the deceased's daughter in law, but any family connection has yet to be established.

Elizabeth Vincent lived with her husband James, a butcher, in Castle Lane, the upper part of Paradise Lane. Her maiden name was Goate. She had married him in 1850 and there was 16-year age difference between them.

As she was not married to a named man Beaten, she could not have been a daughter in law to Mary Beeten, in the modern sense, but at the time of the report 'daughter in law' was also used to describe a stepdaughter, so perhaps this is connected with Edmund Beeten's first marriage.

Elizabeth Vincent herself did not long survive this incident, since she was buried in Downham on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1860.

### **The Downham Market Club – Ron Cansdale**

The club opened in 1937 as the Ex-Servicemen's Club, although it was not connected to the British Legion. There is presently some debate over the building's future, but what any future developer needs to consider is that the front wall, but not the side walls, around the present car park, dates from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and is a listed structure.

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## What's on: March – May

### *March*

4 <sup>th</sup>	Quiz Night	19:00 – 19:30
12 <sup>th</sup>	Family History	14:00 – 16:00
13 <sup>th</sup>	Country Markets	10:00 – 13:00
15 <sup>th</sup>	Tabletop Sale	09:30 – 12:00
18 <sup>th</sup>	Heritage Society Meeting	19:30 – 21:30
	<i>(Including 'Downham from the Ice Age pt2')</i>	
24 <sup>th</sup>	Behind the Scenes at the Museum	10:00 – 12:30
27 <sup>th</sup>	Coffee Morning	10:00 – 12:00

### *April*

1 <sup>st</sup>	Quiz Night	19:00 – 21:30
9 <sup>th</sup>	Family History Group	14:00 – 16:00
15 <sup>th</sup>	Heritage Society Meeting <i>(Including 'Humorous Talk')</i>	19:30 – 21:30
17 <sup>th</sup>	Country Markets	10:00 – 13:00
19 <sup>th</sup>	Table-Top Sale	09:30 - 12:00
24 <sup>th</sup>	Coffee Morning	10:00 – 12:00

### *May*

6 <sup>th</sup>	Quiz Night	19:00 – 21:30
17 <sup>th</sup>	Table-Top sale	09:30 – 12:00
20 <sup>th</sup>	Heritage Society Meeting <i>(Including 'Bexwell Airfield Update')</i>	19:30 – 21:30
29 <sup>th</sup>	Coffee Morning	10:00 – 12:00

Thinking of having a spring clean and not sure what to do with the items you don't need?

Why not book a stall, or donate items for us to sell, at one of our Table-Top stalls the third Sunday of every month!

We can collect your items if required, please contact us either via email or phone.



## Discover Downham

The Old Fire Station  
Priory Rd, Downham Market, PE38 9JS  
[www.discoverdownham.org.uk](http://www.discoverdownham.org.uk)  
Charitable Incorporated Organisation Reg. Charity No. 1154267

# Table Top Sale!

Third Sunday of every month

**Browse** - Enjoy the morning. Bargains galore, refreshments, heritage

**Book your own pitch** - 6 foot pitch, £5 your table, or £6 with table. Payment at time of booking.

**Phone:** 01366 384428

**Email:** [info@discoverdownham.org.uk](mailto:info@discoverdownham.org.uk)

**Visit** Discover Downham.

**Donate** - Articles for sale for the benefit of Discover Downham gratefully received in the week before the event.