

Thornbury and District Heritage Trust

Under Threat - News from Thornbury and District Museum, June, 2022

We are being asked about the future of our lovely local museum at 4 Chapel Street, Thornbury, founded in 1986. After more than two years of uncertainty, due to Covid and the closure of both the Armstrong Hall Complex and the High Street, the future of the museum is now seriously under threat.

What is the current situation?

The museum could be left without a home, endangering the museum's entire collection and its service to the community. The tenancy agreement with the Armstrong Hall Trust (AHT) expires in November 2023 and it may or may not be possible to extend it, even assuming the site is still available for lease. The AHT has shown its preference for sale of the entire Armstrong Hall Complex to finance a new facility, currently anticipated to be at Turnberries.

Museum trustees have been exploring a number of options which could provide the necessary components for a replacement and viable museum and heritage facility and service. However, Thornbury has few public buildings with any available space which might be of use, and as a charity, the overriding problem is the cost of renting elsewhere.

Entry to the museum is free to all. We are an entirely volunteer run organisation, depending on valuable grant funding from both our local councils and the modest income we can generate ourselves.

With every other property and space in Thornbury being used for more profitable enterprises, there is currently no prospect of an affordable alternative site being found.

What is needed to run a museum?

A museum's primary responsibility is to preserve, conserve and share its collection for the public benefit. This requires display space, storage space for items not on display, office space, work space and a place where volunteers can interact with the public. Ideally, these would all be located under the same roof, but could be split between different sites.

Why have we been so popular and well thought of up to now?

Firstly, visitors and volunteers love the museum in spite of its small and awkward size. We have been able to maintain regularly changing exhibitions, permanent key displays, talks and guided walks for public enjoyment and education as well as outreach support for local schools and groups. We respond to numerous questions from both local and distant enquirers, especially about family research, and the museum is still an enduring tourist attraction in Thornbury.

Visitors are welcomed by a team of dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers, mainly retired people, all contributing to running the museum. Local residents and more distant visitors are happy to share their own photographs and local history stories, enriching the heritage record.

Other benefits to the local community are the museum's contribution to wellbeing and mental health. We provide an important and worthwhile opportunity for volunteers as a venue away from personal problems and stresses, as well as for diverse visiting groups of adults and young people.

We also offer opportunities for younger volunteers to gain experience in museum work and services, building confidence and relationships, often leading to entry into further education and employment fields.

What else do we do?

Volunteers undertake local historical research and regularly publish books, booklets and leaflets, and prepare presentations for the public. A museum supported group undertakes important archaeological research around the local district.

The museum's service extends beyond the walls of 4 Chapel Street which is the operational base for organising all our outreach activities outlined above. The Thornbury Heritage Trail was installed as a permanent feature in the town for the Millennium and this is maintained and supported by the museum.

The museum also supports local historical resources and hosts several websites - Thornbury Roots, Tytherington Roots and Thornbury Grammar School - all of which are explored by researchers both local and worldwide. We encourage and facilitate community involvement in local history and heritage, providing further local interaction and contributing to the local volunteer network.

What is at risk in 2022 and 2023?

If the museum is forced to close, the entire heritage record of Thornbury and the surrounding area could no longer be available to the community. An important local collection of artefacts, documents and photographs would be lost to the local area, possibly relocated to more distant museums or even dispersed to any home which would take them.

We have worked hard to achieve and maintain Accredited Museum status, awarded by Arts Council England for reaching a high nationally recognised standard. This is due for reappraisal and renewal at the end of 2023, close to the date when our lease could expire. Without a viable plan to continue a sustainable museum service in suitable premises, further Accreditation will be unattainable. It could mean the end of Thornbury and District Museum after more than 35 years.

The property at 4 Chapel Street, as a non-residential building, can continue to be used as a museum with normal routine repairs for as long as the AHT is willing to continue the lease. If the current building is lost, Thornbury and District Heritage Trust would endeavour to continue preserving local heritage, but this would be extremely difficult. Loss of the premises with no replacement would result in the dispersal of our unique historical items without which local heritage is much more difficult to conserve and share.

What can we do now to save the museum and our local heritage?

We are making the details of our predicament public and we appeal to local residents, businesses and organisations to show their support for the museum and help save it.

Please talk to your friends, put your support in writing, contact your local Thornbury Town and South Glos councillors, and most importantly, let us know your thoughts too.

If anyone has any ideas which might help, or can offer help or expertise, please do get in touch. Email to enquiries@thornburymuseum.org.uk or write to the address below.

Thank you for reading this. T&DHT volunteers and trustees.