

St. Osyth Priory Education Centre

Heritage can be a defining feature in many peoples' lives and being able to access heritage provides roots and cultural identity for a community. Heritage sites are highly valued by their communities and St. Osyth Priory is no exception with the community having a deep sense of ownership and connection with the site. St. Osyth Priory had been shut to the public for decades prior to the opening of the Education Centre. Many people who have moved to the village or have grown up in the area during that time have no idea what is behind the boundary walls. The Education Centre is now providing opportunities for people of all ages to visit the Estate and develop a pride in where they live through having such an important historical feature in their area. The ongoing history of the Priory from Anglo-Saxon times to the present, a span of 1300 years, conveys to the local community continuity of being, endurance and greatness. The 350 acres of Parkland provides the green spaces for the community which are an essential part of wellbeing and creating an environment which is an attractive place to live. By the Education Centre opening access to St. Osyth Priory we are creating opportunities for employment, volunteering and economic benefits to the village through the attraction of visitors and tourists to the area.

The Tendring area faces many challenges when it comes to accessing heritage for people of all ages. This might be transport links, socio-economic or educational attainment. Tendring area is worse than the median in educational attainment in those aged 16yrs to 64yrs and data from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport recognises that people with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to visit museums and heritage than those with lower levels.¹ Unemployment rates are high which can impact the amount of money families have available to spend on leisure, tourism and heritage. It is important that these barriers to accessing heritage are overcome so the benefits of visiting St. Osyth Priory can be felt by all.

Childhood visits are an essential part in overcoming these barriers, research shows that a person who visited a heritage site or museum as a child is more likely to visit throughout adulthood.^{2 3} At St. Osyth Priory Education Centre we are facilitating this access as early as 18 months of age through our pre-school Outdoor Explorers programme. 104 children and adults have accessed the Priory in this way through 2023. During these sessions children and their parents have the opportunity to explore an area of the Estate and discover more about its past and the natural environment. Children make use of our Education Centre to have a go at a wide variety of crafts, games, toys, books and enjoy a nutritious and substantial snack. Using the Wilderness Garden we have a dedicated Forest School space with activities designed to help children develop their fine and gross motor skills as well as interactive and imaginative play, all in the shadow of the 16th century tower.



¹ Department for Culture Media and Sports (2010)

² Freshminds for DCMS, Culture on Demand: Ways to Engage a Broader Audience (2007)

³ Centre for Economics and Business Research for English Heritage (CEBR) Main technical report. Attending heritage sites: A quantitative analysis of data from the Taking Part survey. (2007). Accessed from the English Heritage website, 18 July 2008, http://hc.englishheritage.org.uk/content/pub/Technical_report_quantified_Analysis_Taking_Part_survey_tagged.pdf



We have a diverse range of educational programmes for schools to access on trips and visits. The most popular are the EYFS and Key Stage 1 days on 'Powerful plants and potions' and the Key Stage 2 day on Anglo-Saxon's V's Vikings. On both of these days the children all use the Victorian Rose Garden to discover the origin story of St. Osyth Priory through the legend of Saint Osyth. We are very grateful to the Museum who loan us the use of their replica Viking weapons, which along with our own replica artefacts, serve to enhance the learning experience for the children. In 2023 17 Primary schools have visited the Priory; 1173 primary school children have had the chance to interact with heritage and be inspired to enjoy a lifelong love of history.

We were thrilled to be able to host year 7 students from Colne Community School in October. This was a huge undertaking, having 230 students on site over two days. The students are currently studying Anglo-Saxons at school and being able to explore the fascinating local history helped to bring this history to life and provide context. They explored primary sources relating to the local witch trials in 1582 and developed their skills as historians. In a hands-on workshop every child was able to make a pomander as part of a session learning about medicine in the middle ages. The teachers who organised the trip were so impressed with the way the medicine topic was delivered and how well the students engaged with it, that they asked if Education Centre staff could go into school to teach their GCSE cohort of 158 students, and provide an inspiring start to their topic on Medicine and Public Health in History. We are very keen to support the school in the teaching of this topic and share our resources and expertise.

As well as schools we connect with children and young people across the community by hosting educational days once a month for Home Educating families. Twenty two Home Educating families regularly attend and benefit from the teaching and social opportunities these days provide. They are able to gain an understanding of chronology by looking at key events in History through the Priory site from the Anglo-Saxons to the Civil Wars and beyond. We also cover science and maths topics with nature surveys and activities, taking advantage of having access to



ancient trees, ponds and rare breed livestock and deer.

The St. Osyth Priory Home Ed days are the perfect combination of doing and historical learning. There is always a good mix of fascinating information and hands-on craft or experiments, putting into action the learning. The organisers clearly put in a great deal of time and effort preparing for the sessions, and the gorgeous setting of the priory is the absolute icing on the cake. It is not just the kids that learn a lot and look forward to these great classes.

Katie Court-Giller. Mum to Myla aged 10yrs and Aiden aged 6yrs

We have hosted 2 days for uniformed groups across the Tendring district with tasks designed to help them earn badges within their organisations. These were very well received with 130 children plus 55 leaders attending. They are keen to make this an annual event in the Beaver and Cub calendars. It is hoped we will be able to expand this to reach the Colchester district of Beavers and Cubs as well and we are in discussions with the local Girls Brigade organisation to see what we can offer to their members. 1st St. Osyth Beaver, Cubs and Scouts groups have attended the Priory during their meetings to earn their Naturalist badge by pond dipping and completing nature based surveys and investigations. It was a huge benefit to these young people to have access to this resource on their doorstep.



We have been building on our public programming to give the local community of all ages access to the Priory. We collaborated with the local representative of United in Kind to provide a tour and medieval medicine workshop for a group of adults affected by loneliness. We also worked together to put on a special Forest School session for the parents and toddlers from 'Toosey Tots', the village mum and baby group. This has been a fantastic link between the Education Centre and a variety of different community groups and we plan more collaborations in the future. Home-start Colchester is another local charity we have been collaborating with and have events planned for this year and next including their Christmas party for vulnerable families in December. Grapevine is a local charity working with adults with learning difficulties. We are looking forward to hosting 25 of their members and their carers on an educational day learning about medieval medicine in the 14th century chapel. This is such a sensory experience in a magical space and we are sure will be well received by all who attend.



We hosted 2 different groups of adults on 31st October for a special Halloween tour of the Priory and talk on the witch trials. We worked collaboratively with the Museum on this event and were able to use the fantastic information display boards and props they had prepared for their own Halloween weekend event. That evening we hosted 20 children and their parents for a fun, family Halloween event with crafts, games and refreshments. This also included a tractor trailer ride with an exciting pumpkin spotting activity and the chance to see the extensive parkland and rare white deer.



The Education Centre has also been engaging with adults off site by speaking at local Historical, Horticultural and Cultural community groups. The first was on 14th November and more are planned for 2024. This is another area where we work closely with the Museum and Nigel, the curator has been able to give tours and talks to community groups as well as academics and authors interested in the history of the site.

In the summer term we hosted work experience students from Philip Morant School and Clacton Coastal Academy. Both students were able to experience what a carer in



heritage could look like. They provided help and support to centre staff in the creation of resources and setting up activities for visitors to the Priory during the week that they were with us. This was a fantastic way to connect with local schools and we hope to be able to do this again in 2024.

In 2023 we held 2 large scale public events organised by the Education Centre and Priory and Parish Trust. Our Coronation Picnic gave hundreds of people the opportunity to explore the Estate, go up the tower, enjoy a tractor trailer tour and live music in the Precinct. Working with Black Jacket events we are able to hold a Community Christmas Light Switch-on event. This includes craft stall, local food stands, community carol singing with the Salvation Army Band, Children's crafts and Santa turning on the festive lights inside the Darcy House and around the grounds. The community are very keen to see the restoration work that has taken place at the Priory and be inside the grounds and the free tickets were claimed within minutes of being made available.

Communicating effectively with the community about the work of the Education Centre is an important way to promote a sense of connection between local people and the Priory. This is especially important as the site had been closed to the public for so long prior to the opening of the Education Centre. We have been doing this by writing regular articles in 'St. Osyth Life'; a community run magazine which is delivered for free to over 2000 households in the parish. As well as writing about our work, we have also published articles on different aspects of the history of the site. Teaching the community about the Priory is a valuable way of fostering a link to the past and pride of place for where they live. We have also started a monthly newsletter which is sent via email to those who attend our events, volunteers and any members of the public who subscribe. This is a one page summary of our work each month so people can feel connected to our work and be informed of future events. It also provides an opportunity for us to thank those who support our work each month through giving their time or donations of resources. In addition, we run a Facebook page and Instagram account where we post regularly about our work. This is an key way for us to promote our public events.

The summer term in 2023 was fully booked and we are taking bookings for 2024. Many of these bookings are as a result of personal recommendations made by the public and teaching staff who have already made a visit to the Priory. This is incredibly encouraging and we anticipate the Education Centre will continue to go from strength to strength. Our plans for 2024 also include recruiting another member of teaching staff and a team of trained volunteers to assist with larger school groups and public events. We hope to be able to create a local network in the heritage and outdoor education sector so we can share resources, ideas and rewards in the form of unique access opportunities for volunteering.

Helen Brown
Education Manager