

**BANISHING THE BACKLOG WITH  
GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING:**

# **SEARCH FOR THE STARS**

Search for the Stars aims to completely digitise our collection

Using crowdsourcing and simplified assembly line style processes, this goal is in sight.

I wanted to get involved because I'm interested in learning something new and gaining more museum skills

DESSA

It has given me the skills and experience which have been beneficial while studying ... which would have been difficult to get otherwise

MICHAEL

This is a great opportunity to convert any anxiety or uncertainty into satisfaction and fulfilment

JIN

It has provided me with a link to the 'museum community' and an opportunity to work towards something that I am passionate about

HANNAH

## WHO WE ARE

With 17 historic buildings set in 75 acres of Suffolk countryside, the Museum of East Anglian Life is an accredited museum founded in 1967. We hold approximately 40,000 objects acquired largely through donation. Our collection has a particular focus on the production of food and social history relating to it, reflective of the region's strong agricultural character. It is broad in scale and type, including costume, tools, entertainment, working steam engines, contemporary art, ceramics and buildings.

**33,303**  
collection records have been transferred



**449**  
people have volunteered on the project



people from **25** different countries have volunteered



## GOALS

We began the project in January 2018, with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund and the Headley Trust. The desire behind Search for the Stars will be shared by many museums: to transfer all object records from handwritten index cards into a digital catalogue that can be shared online. Clearly this work should be a priority for museums in the 21st century. While digitisation is not a panacea, it should be considered a baseline offer. It makes it possible for more people to globally engage with a collection should they wish to do so. Getting our records out of filing cabinets and into the public domain means that more people can use the information and data we have to do things we cannot yet envisage – it unlocks creativity. As an ACE National Portfolio Organisation, involving more people with our collection is a key priority.

Digitisation also simplifies internal practices and empowers staff across the organisation to engage with the collection rather than being reliant on the memory of one or two 'collections gurus'. Good data makes it much easier to manage the collection, keep it secure and consider disposal of objects – without knowing what you have, how can you make good decisions about it?



Figure 1: Search for the Stars sessions at Nottingham Trent University and Wymondham College

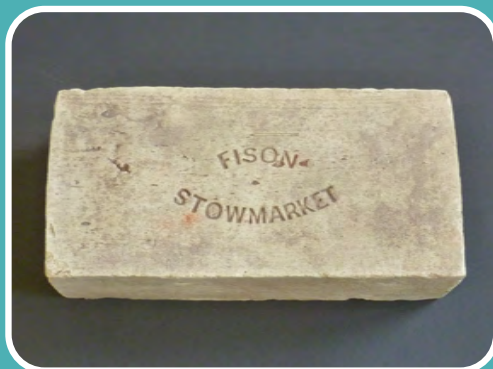
## HOW THE PROJECT WORKS

The project makes use of an assembly line process – breaking digitisation down into simple tasks which can be completed with minimal skills. It also uses existing software.

All participants require to take part in the project is an internet connection and a computer. Volunteers working on site photograph our record cards which are saved on a cloud based storage system. Participants are issued batches of cards to work on in their own time. We use an online collections management system (after some research, we settled on eHive because its charging model is based on data used and not on a per user license model).

We interview all prospective volunteers on the phone to understand why they want to take part. We provide training in the form of a guide they can refer back to as they are working through cards. They receive cards to practise on before they are let loose in the real catalogue. The tasks we ask people to complete are relatively simple. Training takes about an hour. If someone only volunteers for a day, their labour has still been useful and they have made a valued contribution. In the pre-Covid world, we ran evening drop-in sessions through the Meetup app as well as sessions for Sixth Forms and University groups.

### CASE STUDY: THE FEMINIST BRICK



This was one of the objects given 'star object' status by a volunteer.

Between 1858 and 1877, the Prentice family lived in Abbot's Hall, the 'big house' of the estate which is now the museum. Catherine was the eldest daughter of the family. She married her cousin, James Fison, in 1848. James was a merchant, miller and brick-maker. He died just four years later, leaving Catherine at the helm of the brickworks and other enterprises.

Catherine became a brick and tar manufacturer, miller, wool merchant and maltster – a successful local business leader at a time when women were rarely seen in such roles. In 1861, she employed 33 men and 17 boys. By 1871, this had expanded to 46 men, one clerk and eight boys. On her death in 1910, Catherine's estate was valued at 979 pounds, 13 shillings and five pence, a substantial sum.

As this brick cannot be dated with any precision, we cannot say for certain whether it was produced under Catherine's management. However, it provides a tangible link to the local business empire over which she presided.

One key to the project's success is accepting that getting something done imperfectly and then improving it over time is better than never starting it at all. There will be errors as many hands are involved. We have mitigated against this by issuing batches more than once so that some volunteers are effectively checking the work of other volunteers. Room for error remains. But which curator, however diligent, is themselves immune to making mistakes?

The second important element is that we built in an opportunity for people to make their own judgments. It's not just an assembly line.

Volunteers can nominate star objects as they go for whatever reason they like – a personal interest, something unusual or that they think is a particularly fine example of something. It means that people feel some sense of agency – they’re not just doing data entry; they are engaged and they have a voice. The museum benefits by having multiple perspectives on the collection. From 32,743 records processed, volunteers have flagged 351 ‘star objects’. We’d urge anyone involved in a project like this to consider building in an element of judgment – people don’t necessarily exercise it often, but the potential is there.

The screenshot shows the eHive interface for an object record. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'My eHive', 'Create', 'Search', and 'Help'. A search bar contains 'My objects' and there are links for 'Reports' and 'Sign out'. The main header of the record reads 'Book; 1915; STMEA:75.A.114.1'. Below this is a large image of the book cover, which features various insects and butterflies. To the right of the image is a 'Tools' panel with options like 'Create a similar object', 'Edit record', 'Edit images (1)', 'Edit PDF files', 'Move to recycle bin', 'Update copyright licence', and 'Create report'. Below the image are controls for downloading the image (10 MB) and viewing metadata. The record details include:
 

- From:** Museum of East Anglian Life
- Object number:** STMEA:75.A.114.1
- Accession Date:** 30.10.1975
- Name/Title:** Book
- Classification:** SOCIETY-Education
- Dublin Core:** Physical Object
- Brief Description:** The book is entitled 'Some Secrets of Nature'. It was used at Rattlesden Junior School.
- Public Description (About this object):** The book is entitled 'Some Secrets of Nature'. It was used at Rattlesden Junior School.
- Date Made:** 1915
- Location History:** SOS:N13
- Location History Date:** 26.04.2019
- Location History:** SOS:N13
- Location History Date:** 21.08.2007
- Item Count:** 1
- Measurements:** Height: 194mm, Width: 130mm, Thickness: 20mm (144 pages plus bibliography)
- Related Object Notes:** STMEA:75.A.114.2, STMEA:75.A.114.3, STMEA:75.A.114.4, STMEA:75.A.114.5, STMEA:75.A.114.6. Originally recorded on the same card.
- General Notes:**

 On the right side, there is a 'Tags' section with a list of tags including '1900s', 'childhood', 'community', 'people', 'school', 'Stowmarket', and 'Suffolk'. Below the tags is an 'Add tag' button. At the bottom right, there is a section for 'This object is in 0 communities' with a 'View this public object' button and an 'Update' button. A 'Share' section at the bottom right contains social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Tumblr, and LinkedIn.

Figure 2: An example record on eHive worked on by several volunteers

# SEARCH FOR THE STARS

BANISHING THE BACKLOG WITH GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING:

## WHAT HAVE WE ACHIEVED?

In the three years the project has been running, we have been able to transfer over 30,000 records to eHive, engaging with over 400 people. Before the first Covid lockdown we had a fairly constant 15–30 active volunteers jointly working on approximately 500 records each month. In the May 2020 over 100 volunteers processed an enormous 5,000 records.

This mobilisation of labour has meant that most of our objects now have at least basic entries on our digital catalogue. We were therefore able to begin the next phase of the project. This involves having every batch looked at by a second volunteer who acts as a quality control checker as well as improving searchability of the object on eHive by adding thematic tags.

Volunteers have also begun researching the ‘star objects’ that have been highlighted. Every day we are getting a clearer picture of our collection. This task also acts as a progression for volunteers who want to engage more deeply with the collection.

## VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

Much of East Anglia is rural and a lack of transport can lead to isolation and reduced opportunities for volunteering and personal enrichment. This project removes a barrier to participation. As it’s all online and can be done at any time of day in any place, we’ve been able to broaden our usual volunteer demographic. We are reaching those of working age, students and younger volunteers.

During the countrywide first lockdown, with many unable to work or study, and being stuck at home, we had a phenomenal increase in engagement with the project. We recruited 164 remote volunteers. 80% of these fell into

## Age of volunteers



Figure 2: Comparison of age groups of existing volunteers and those joined during the first national lockdown in the UK

## Education level of volunteers

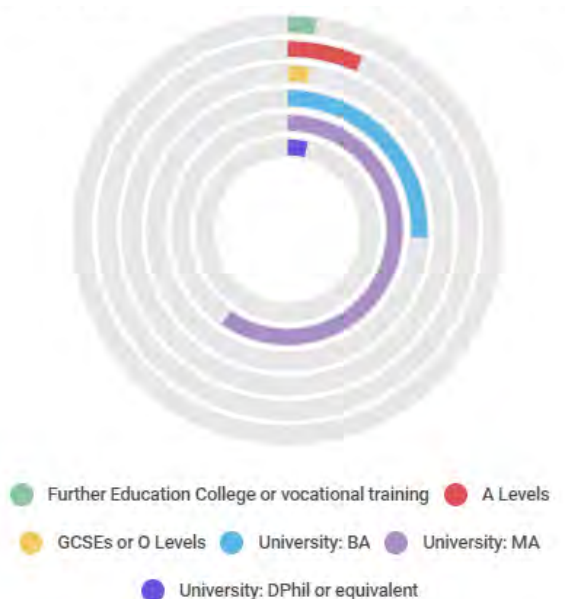


Figure 3: Education data collected from recruits in the first national lockdown in the UK

the 20-34 age group, in comparison to 50% of pre-existing volunteers (even prior to Covid, this project was very successful at reaching a younger demographic which museums often struggle to engage).

We found, due to recruitment via Leicester University Jobs Desk, our newer remote volunteers were often educated to degree level or above; some had experience working with collections, or in the heritage sector more generally. We also used more locally-targeted platforms such as Facebook and the Next Door app, which enabled us to connect to people on furlough from their jobs who had no prior experience in the sector.

### CASE STUDY 1: SONIA

Sonia grew up upon 14 acres of land belonging to the Suffolk Naturalists Society. When she found herself furloughed she came across the Search for the Stars callout on Facebook. Sonia was completely new to collections work but her passion for the objects themselves, and an interest in seeing “behind the scenes” of a museum has resulted in an impressive contribution during lockdown. In Sonia’s words “rural life is not just in my DNA, it’s ingrained under my finger nails.” In her childhood, “We grew vegetables for the table, skinned rabbits and moles, gathered the hay for the horses, went fishing, cut wood for the fire, fed the pigs, rode the donkeys, mended the fences, collected the eggs, plucked the chickens, helped cook it for the dinner and baked the cakes!”. Sonia recalls using the same Tala Icing set that we have in our collection for her own baking. It’s for this reason that she’s enjoyed working on this project so much. Most of the objects she’s encountered have either been familiar to her or she’s used them herself.



From the outset of the project we had reached a small handful of volunteers in the USA and Australia but it wasn’t until March 2020 when we saw this increase to four continents. In total we’ve engaged with people from 25 countries including; Canada, China, Singapore, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Sweden.

### Nationalities of volunteers

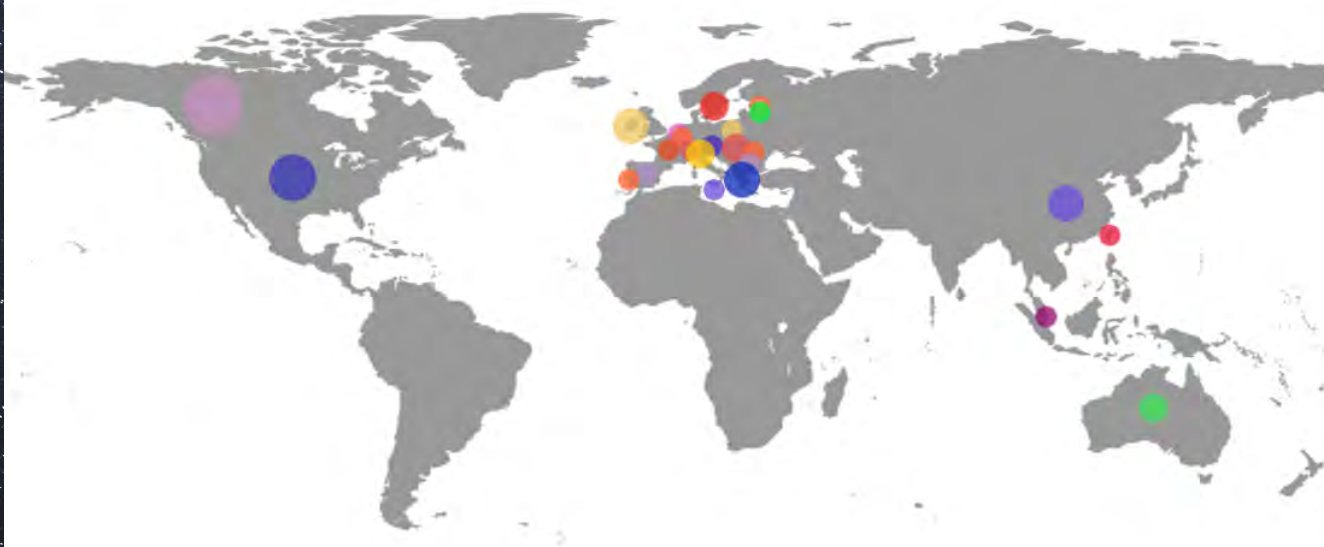
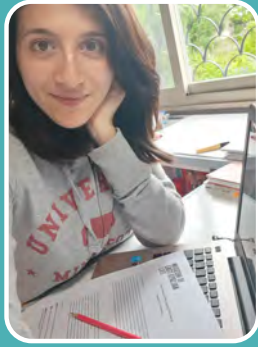


Figure 4: Map using data collected by volunteer registration forms excluding the UK. Larger circles denotes higher engagement with people from these nations

### CASE STUDY 2: CHIARA



Chiara is a 30-year-old archaeologist from Italy who found our remote volunteering opportunity through the Leicester University Jobs Desk. Having existing experience in exhibition development, research and audience engagement she was keen to gain more skills in cataloguing and collections management. During the Covid-19 pandemic Chiara was able to expand her CV whilst enthusiastically cataloguing and researching objects. She says "working as a Collections Digitisation Volunteer has represented to me a precious opportunity to build expertise in the museum field while enhancing my skills, networking with the staff members and gaining valuable hands-on experience useful for future employment in this sector." Chiara, like other international volunteers, have been able to engage with a collection usually out of their reach, "being part of all this has been fulfilling not only for my career prospects but also for the joy of helping others and doing something meaningful for the whole community".

Some participants told us that a key motivation is career development. For many who helped over lockdown, the project appealed because it kept their minds active with something positive during the uncertainty of the pandemic. Many volunteers said it helped their mental health and wellbeing whilst they were at home.

### CASE STUDY 3: OLIVIA

Olivia, like Sonia, had no prior museum experience but wanted to get involved in the project from her home in Norfolk to gain some skills in the area. Olivia explains how along with learning about the collections, the project has "helped so much in this strange time". Expanding on this in a video she recorded for us she explains how the prospect of not working for a period of time when she was furloughed was particularly daunting for her, having never been out of work or study. "Giving myself daily targets to work through the records was an absolutely massive help in terms of keeping myself busy. I was concerned about mental health and the impact lockdown might have if I had absolutely nothing to do." She also says how "it was really nice to feel like I was helping the museum ... making their collections more accessible for people".

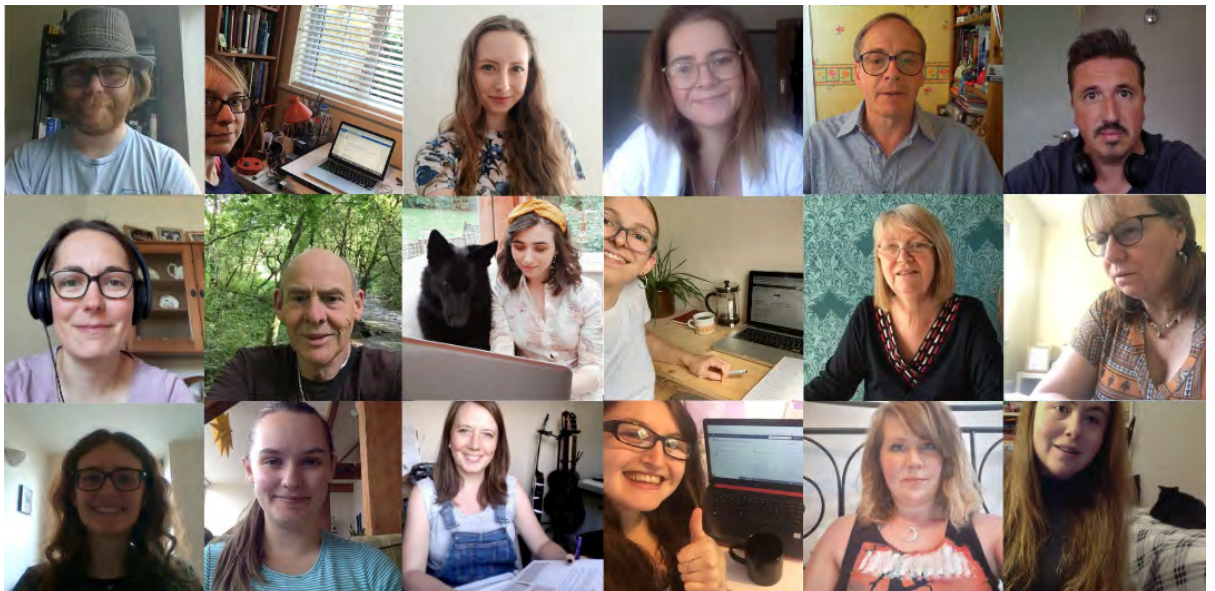
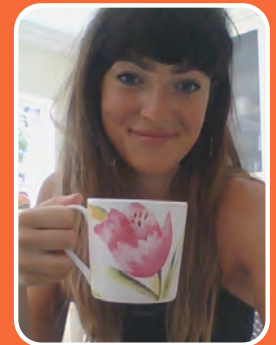


Figure 5: Some of the people who have helped us in their work spaces



## PROJECT RESOURCES AND COSTS

The most significant expense on the project is staff time. The second is the off-the-peg collections catalogue. We have a subscription for our eHive software, which costs approximately £650 a year. The data is stored on the cloud and backed up by eHive to several locations. We also periodically back it up ourselves onto a hard drive for extra insurance.

Other project costs are negligible. Beyond staff time and the cost of the database and a computer, this is a low-cost project which does not require any particular technical expertise. It does however, require clear-sighted planning and excellent organisational skills, in order to establish and follow processes for issuing batches of records, reissuing them if volunteers drop out, and gauging how many records have been done so that everyone has a collective sense of the progress of the project to motivate them. Being good at managing and motivating people are – as always – key skills.



Figure 6: Trainees and volunteers working in the studio

## SHOOTING STARS

We added a new strand to the project after we had got the collections digitisation up and running – Shooting Stars – which aims to photograph the collection and enhance the online records with images. A collections trainee, with us through the British Museum’s Museum Futures scheme (a Skills for the Future year-long placement funded by the Heritage Fund) set up a photography studio in a shed on site.

Volunteers have been working through batches of objects and photographing them. We bought camera equipment, lights, a backdrop and a rig – costing c.£2,500. This provides another volunteering opportunity which appeals to people with different skills. It was sufficiently popular that we created a second, mobile studio to enable us to work in the galleries and historic buildings as well as in the collections store.

# SEARCH FOR THE STARS

BANISHING THE BACKLOG WITH GLOBAL VOLUNTEERING:



Figure 7: Photographs taken of the collection for the Shooting Stars project

## WHAT'S NEXT?

We will continue with the project until all our collection records are digitised so we can move over to a fully digital system. We anticipate that this will be completed in 2021. We will also continue to photograph the objects and publish records online as they are checked.

The next phase will involve working with targeted groups to bring in more voices to our collections work. We will use the raw material created by the Search for the Stars project and run workshops that will capture different perspectives on the objects we have. It will also help us to work with groups we haven't reached as strongly through Search for the Stars, for example experts, practitioners such as farmers, BAME groups and older people with memories of objects in use. We will work with these groups and the local, national and international volunteers we have recruited through the project to reassess what our collection holds, work out what is missing, and what stories we should be telling.

What we are trying to do with this project is a spring clean – physically and intellectually. Before we can look at what we should be collecting and how we should be interpreting our collection to be relevant for 21st-century audiences, we need to understand what we have. This wouldn't be possible without the success of Search for the Stars.

**MUSEUM OF  
EAST ANGLIAN  
LIFE**

View our digital catalogue here:

**[EHIVE.COM/COLLECTIONS/3978](http://ehive.com/collections/3978)  
MUSEUM-OF-EAST-ANGLIAN-LIFE**

<http://eastanglianlife.org.uk/>

Museum of East Anglian Life, Stowmarket, Suffolk, IP14 1DL

01449 612229