

## Dorking Museum, Surrey

A bequest by one of its volunteers allowed Dorking Museum to carry out a much-needed redevelopment. *Caroline Worthington* looks at the results

Ten years ago, Dorking Museum, a small volunteer-run institution in the south east of England, received a windfall when one of its stewards left it £500,000 in a bequest. With the money and lots of voluntary effort, the Dorking and District Preservation Society has, in its own words, turned the museum around. Three rooms on the ground floor of the former iron foundry, which has been its home since 1976, have been knocked through to make one open-plan space and the archives have moved to the first floor.

The project has taken a decade of planning and consultation, although happily the museum hasn't been renovated to within an inch of its life. On a roof beam are the words: "Welcome to Dorking Museum" in large lettering, which together with the smartened-up old showcases give the gallery an attractive feel. But exhibits such as the stuffed Dorking cockerel and hen have benefited from new lighting and a clean; they have probably never looked better. A Dorking hen, bred for the London market, a short rail journey and before that coach ride away, is the museum's mascot.

Visitors to the museum learn that hens were crammed by fatters and then transported to London by higglers. Famous for

their five claws (rather than the normal four) the breed was a favourite for 19th-century tables, including Queen Victoria's. It was reported that something was amiss with the Queen when even the white Dorking eggs served for her breakfast could not make her comfortable. From the 10-foot tall sculpture on a local roundabout to the shirts of the local football team, the Chicks, the cockerel stands proudly on many signs around the town, including the museum and its family trail.

### World wars

I hadn't heard of Dorking hens, which give the museum's logo a Gallic tone, but I did recall the Dorking Gap, a break in the Surrey Hills that it was feared would offer an invading army an open door to the capital.

In 1871, a best-selling novel, *The Battle of Dorking*, set alarm bells ringing by describing how the British army was defeated by the army of an unnamed (but Prussian-sounding) country. I searched in vain for a copy but didn't have any problems finding references to real as opposed to imagined conflict.

The story and impact of the two world wars takes up a third of the museum space. The museum's home, the town's former



Right: a decade of planning and consultation is behind the recently revamped Dorking Museum. Below: A Corner of Old Dorking, by 18th-century artist GM Downing





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foundry, was busy during the second world war as its workers produced machine tools and iron castings around the clock for the conflict. Two office cabinets have been commandeered as showcases containing “top secret” material such as cannon balls, ration books, and a piece of German parachute silk retrieved in 1940. The attached note reads: “One more nail in Hitler’s coffin.”

### Famous residents

Dorking is proud of its famous residents: the novelist EM Forster and the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, who both helped find homes for wartime refugees and evacuees; and actor Leslie Howard of *Gone with the Wind* fame (who died in the war) made his home in Dorking. He played host to Hollywood friends there, including Walt Disney and Clark Gable. A clip of footage of Howard, or better still something from recently discovered home movies, would help bring this section to life. Laurence Olivier was Dorking born. Again, footage would be a welcome addition, or just the actor’s memorable voice.

Jonathan Tyers, the owner of London’s Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, moved out to the hills of Surrey in the 18th century. His estate, Denbies, was later owned

### A Dorking procession captured for posterity

by Lord Ashcombe, a geology enthusiast whose collection of fossils, known as Lord Ashcombe’s teeth, is on display in a series of glass-topped drawers.

### Suffragette links

The museum’s founding collection boasts many fossils, including the tail of an iguanodon. They were discovered in the chalk quarries owned by the London builder Thomas Cubitt, whose grandson, Henry Cubitt, was the second Lord Ashcombe.

A display of Wedgwood ceramics comes from Leith Hill Place, bought in 1847 by Josiah Wedgwood, grandson of the famous potter. His wife was Charles Darwin’s sister and the scientist was a regular visitor. The house was later to become the childhood home of his grandson, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

A story of a famous local resident that could do with a bit more animation is that of the leader of the Suffragette movement, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. She devised the green, white and purple colour scheme and edited the journal, *Votes for Women*. Her husband’s wealth supported the movement. They were arrested together with Mrs Pankhurst for encouraging the large-scale smashing of shop-

windows. The couple refused to pay their prosecution costs and faced bankruptcy. An auction of their belongings brought 4,000 supporters wearing suffragette colours to Dorking to buy back their possessions.

But perhaps the most touching story of all is that of William Mullins, who left Dorking among the Pilgrim Fathers. His house still stands on West Street and is the only surviving home of those who sailed on the *Mayflower* to the New World. He was a shoemaker by trade, and left a thriving business. A simple interactive encourages families to dress up as passengers on the *Mayflower* and imagine what the voyage was like. His story did not have a happy ending. Mullins was dead within three months of landing in America along with most of his young family.

A programme of temporary exhibitions will help sustain local interest and hopefully encourage repeat visits – it was busy on the Saturday lunchtime when I went. However, a few theatrical touches could really bring the stories of the town and its famous sons and daughters to life.

*Caroline Worthington is the chief executive of Bexley Heritage Trust, Kent*

### Project data

**Cost** £500,000 (including acquisition of building)

**Main funder** Owen Russ

**Exhibition design** Smith and Jones