



Newsletter

November 2021



Hello Friends

A busy Committee meeting on the 25th October as the future of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery at Apsley House still hangs in the balance. On a more positive note we were also discussing possible speakers for our monthly meetings in 2022.

Monthly Zoom Talk

Wednesday 24th November 7.30pm Grant Aston, ceramicist.



Grant Aston's ceramic sculpture 'Radioactivitat' is in the Swindon Collection. Here is a description from his website:

'With this piece I wanted to explore how radiation mutates cells and distorts the fabric and function of them. I distorted the shapes I constructed with, trying to create awkwardness by squaring off curves and squashing the hand built clay girders.'

<http://www.grantaston.com/>

Thanks to David Dawson Director of the Wiltshire Museum, who gave us a very interesting and informative talk about Eric Ravilious and the exhibition 'Downland Man'. See below.

For a write up of the talk visit: <http://friendsofsmag.blogspot.com/>

To see a recording of the talk visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnhG0-Rdx88>

Monthly Zoom talks to come

There won't be a talk in December but hopefully **Neil Redfern** Executive Director of the Council for British Archaeology, will be available in the new year.

Friends of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery Annual General Meeting,

will take place on Monday 29th November on Zoom, more information to follow

15th December Friends' Christmas Social 6.30-8pm Civic Offices, Euclid Street

With Covid rates rising in Swindon, we might have to reconsider this event. Update to follow.

Trips to look forward to

Eric Ravilious exhibition 'Downland Man' Wiltshire Museum, Devizes. 18th November, 11.30am

The 49 bus to Trowbridge via Devizes leaves at 5 minutes past the hour from Swindon bus station, passes through Old Town and arrives close to the museum 55 minutes later.

Please let Susanne Webb know if you would like to join the group as numbers are limited at the Museum. Susanne's email address is susanne.webb@gmail.com

Ongoing exhibition

A Century of British Art - Bournemouth Arts Club 1920-2020'

Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth 1st October 2021– 1st March 2022

Look out for news of a Friends trip, by own transport, with a tour of the exhibition by Dr Gill Clarke, the curator of the exhibition. A minimum group of six will be needed.

On the 21st October a few Friends boarded the Barnes coach to Bournemouth to see this exhibition, with the bonus of a cool but bright sunny day by the sea.

Included in the exhibition are nine paintings from the Swindon Collection, displayed together with this description,

'A Selection of Paintings from the Swindon Museum and Art Gallery Permanent Collection

The diverse group of nine paintings by leading artists created between 1907 and 1955 were originally exhibited in Bournemouth in Summer 1957 as part of a larger Bournemouth Arts Club Loan Exhibition from Swindon's remarkable Modern British Art Collection.

Their return demonstrates the range of styles and subject matter and distinctive quality of work that Club members were inspired and challenged by some sixty years ago. Comprising of both abstract and figurative works the richly sombre *Composition in Black and White*, by influential artist Ben Nicholson, is particularly noteworthy being one of his finest abstract paintings, produced during the 1930s.'

The display includes a catalogue from the 1957 exhibition, loaned by a Friend of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery. The catalogue notes, "THIS GROUP OF PICTURES chosen from the permanent municipal collection of Swindon is made available to us by courtesy of the Mayor and Corporation of Swindon and the Borough Librarian.'

So interesting that visitors could see works of art over 60 years ago that we were also able to enjoy until Swindon Museum and Art Gallery was closed.

A selection of the paintings on display can be seen at:

https://artuk.org/discover/curations/view_as/grid/search/keyword:bournemouth-arts-club

Friends' Website

Click on <http://www.friendsofsmag.org> to find details of talks, newsletters, news, videos of talks, a link to the blog and you can also **make a donation to FSMAG**.

We are putting together a list of paintings, artefacts, restorations etc. which Friends have contributed to Swindon Museum and Art Gallery over the years, to be added to the website.

Instagram

Did you know that the Friends have an **Instagram account** with nearly 1,000 followers?

We share news of talks and other events etc on the account so do give it a follow.

<https://www.instagram.com/friendsofswindonmag/>

Don't forget the Friends' page on the '**We Are Swindon**' website:

<https://weareswindon.co.uk/swindons-charity-hub/friends-of-swindon-museum-and-art-gallery/>

Save Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

Home of the Croc!



This is the new poster, which the Save Our Museum and Art Gallery group plan to distribute. If you can help with door to door distribution please contact Linda Kasmaty.

admin@friendsofsmag.org

Perhaps you could print this image and put it in your window, or send it on to a friend.

The text on the reverse of the poster is included overleaf.

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery: where are we now?

Apsley House, in Old Town, has housed Swindon's museum since the 1930s. The 1960s saw the addition of the art gallery. The Museum and Art Gallery (SMAG) last opened to the public on 18 March 2020. Then Covid regulations required temporary closure. 19 July 2021 saw all Covid restrictions lifted. But Swindon Council announced that "Apsley House constrains SMAG in fulfilling its potential". Further, the Council intended to sell it to help fund the proposed new cultural quarter in the town centre. Meanwhile they would put the collections into storage. That plan meant that, for an indefinite period, all Swindonians would see on show would be some of the less prestigious artworks, or photographs of them, in public or private locations around the town. Following sustained pressure from "Save Our Museum and Art Gallery", the Council proposed in addition to move part of the collections, temporarily, into the Civic Offices.

The Friends of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery was set up in 1993 to help purchase artworks and museum exhibits, to volunteer in the museum and to hold talks and events. On learning of the proposed closure, the Friends formed a campaigning group, Save our Museum and Gallery, "SOMAG", with the aim of getting Apsley House reopened until the collections can be moved into a new permanent home. Because there's a much-loved gharial in the museum, we used 'Save Our Croc' as our strapline. The Museum holds an excellent local collection that illuminates Swindon's history from the pre-dinosaur era to the twentieth century. Many of the objects are too large, fragile or valuable to go on tour. And, like the artworks, they gain significance when seen as part of a story. The Swindon Collection of Twentieth Century British Art is a collection of national renown. It's something of which Swindon should be immensely proud. The current plan will render the collection largely inaccessible to students, scholars and visitors from outside Swindon for an indefinite period. No one will believe that Swindon is a town that values culture – but the Council needs to persuade potential investors in the Cultural Quarter that an outstanding cultural offer will be of economic benefit to the town!

South Swindon Parish Council has offered to take on a short-term lease to run SMAG along with Old Town Library. We believe this is a good plan and the co-location of museum and library would benefit both.

Swindon Borough Council has made statements, which give a misleading picture of what is going on. For instance:

MYTH: SOMAG does not support the Cultural Quarter plans.

TRUTH: Rubbish! We wholeheartedly support a Cultural Quarter centred on the Kimmerfields site.

Swindon needs a new theatre, new homes for Prime Theatre, Swindon Dance and Create Studios and a more spacious and accessible art gallery and museum.

MYTH: SOMAG is a selfish Old Town organisation trying to keep the Museum and Art Gallery in Old Town.

TRUTH: Our members live all over Swindon and beyond, and we worked incredibly hard in support of the last two HLF bids to move SMAG into the town centre.

MYTH: Apsley House is so inaccessible that it is unfit for purpose as a museum and art gallery.

TRUTH: Apsley House is far from perfect but if accessibility was such a problem it would not have been granted its status as an Arts Council Accredited Museum. Keeping the collections in Apsley House is the most accessible medium term solution. Apsley House is free to enter, and if the Council wants to make it more accessible, it should start by opening it on Sundays, like STEAM.

MYTH: Showing small exhibitions in locations around town will make the artworks more accessible.

TRUTH: Strict conditions prohibit showing most of the Swindon Collection in non-museum sites. And if the Council really believes this is the case, why is it hoping to build a new, bigger museum and art

gallery? We have supported the Art on Tour initiative financially, as outreach to schools, colleges and other interest groups is an important part of any museum and gallery's work and helps increase accessibility. But it is no substitute for a visit to the museum or art gallery itself and artworks hived off to public or private locations around the town will be largely inaccessible to students and visitors to Swindon.

MYTH: Selling Apsley House now is necessary to help fund the Cultural Quarter.

TRUTH: This makes no sense. The proceeds of sale of Apsley House will make no meaningful contribution to funding the CQ (estimated cost £80m) and will be eroded by inflation before a new art gallery can be built.

MYTH: The Civic Offices will be a better temporary home than Apsley House.

TRUTH: We are told that the displays will be opened up on an "incremental" basis. What does that mean? No details of this plan have been published, it has not been costed, and the budget is totally unrealistic.

On the 23rd September Linda Kasmaty presented the petition to the full Swindon Borough Council meeting, here are her notes and her Petition Speech

The Save Swindon Museum and Art Gallery petition signatories were submitted to Swindon Borough Council ahead of their full council meeting to be held on 23 September at 7pm, so that the matter could be discussed by councillors. As the person submitting the petition, I was allowed 5 minutes to speak about it, explain the basis of the requests, and why it was important, and be clear about the outcome we were asking for. I read the speech out so I didn't forget any points, unfortunately I had to stand on the balcony, not the best place to attract attention, with no possibility of making eye contact. I did start the speech by asking if people could hear me. I've put a copy of the speech below:

'Mr Mayor and assembled Councillors

The petition you have received today is a reflection of the strong feelings aroused by this Council's proposal to sell Apsley House and consign the town's museum and art collections to limbo for the next ten years, or however long it takes to build the new Art Pavilion as part of Swindon's grand vision of a new 'Cultural Quarter'.

Why sell Apsley House before a suitable replacement has been built?

The petition was started because Swindon Museum and Art Gallery currently housed at Apsley House in Old Town is under threat of permanent closure, its contents being put into storage, and the building sold as 'surplus to requirements'. The museum has been housed there for the last 90 years, and the art collection for the last 60 years. Apsley House is a much loved facility despite its shortcomings, a lovely place to visit, and could be improved with some creative thinking. Please reconsider before passing it into private ownership; it is to use a hackneyed term, a jewel in Swindon's crown.

Apsley House is a public building, it is not surplus to requirements, and it's shameful that the council think of selling it now. The money realised from the sale, would not be used for years on the new Art Pavilion and museum. It can only be worth more in years to come?

*Swindon needs a museum and art gallery, it does have one, let's open it. It's a scandal that a town with 250000 population contemplates closing its museum and art gallery for an indefinite period. **Everyone** in the art world I have spoken to has expressed disbelief at these plans, and said surely that couldn't happen?*

The current plans to build a Cultural Quarter are laudable, but there are many challenges ahead, it may take 10-20 years to realise this ambition. In the interim, it has been proposed that Art on Tour where reproductions of artworks are taken to popular locations via pop up gazebos, be used in place of the art gallery, with the mantra 'more art to more people' being frequently used. Art on Tour is fine, but as a signpost to the real thing by which I mean a proper museum and art gallery where collections can be seen together.

The latest report, was passed at Cabinet on 8 September, suggesting that some of the collections be housed in the first floor of the Civic Offices which would be incrementally converted for use as somewhere pieces of art and museum artefacts could be viewed.

Effectively then, the latest plans are to use the £400,000 allocated in 2019 to Apsley House, be spent on moving all collections from Apsley House, relocating some to the Civic Offices and putting the rest in storage. There have been to date no costings for any of this, no specifics. In their current state, the Civic Offices are not suitable to house SMAG. The space comprises office rooms off a corridor and the Council's proposal to improve the space "incrementally" does not imply that the space will do justice to the Art Collection any time soon. Out of sight, out of mind? This is without considering the security implications of public access to the building.

There is a proposal from the Parish Council that after discussions with SBC, they would be interested in the short term transfer of Apsley House to South Swindon Parish Council so they could reopen it as soon as possible. This would seem to be an ideal solution for resolving the loss of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery.

It is really important for Swindon and its environs that we have a working museum and art gallery in the interim between now and when the Cultural Quarter is built. We need to give people confidence that we know how to look after our inheritance, and going forward we can acquire and display bequeathed items. At the moment I have emails on an almost daily basis from people choosing to not leave art works or ceramic collections to Swindon. We need to wake up and not sleep walk our way into being entirely off the cultural map of the UK.

How can we even imagine a town the size of Swindon, and growing, without a Museum and Art Gallery?

I'll end with where we started, the wording of the petition which 5,000 people signed:

'We support the call by the Friends of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery for the Swindon Collection of Modern British Art and the Museum Collections to be retained on show in Apsley House until they can be moved to a new home where they are on show to the public.

Finally, closing the museum and art gallery will seriously undermine credibility of Swindon Borough Council with potential funders of the Cultural quarter.'

There were points raised by Councillors Jane Milner-Barry, Jim Robbins and Jim Grant who agreed with the petition and made some excellent points including the fact that being an Arts Council priority area isn't a good thing, it's quite shameful, the Kimmerfields office development is 10 years behind schedule so how long will the CQ take to build? Cllrs Mary Martin and Nick Burns- Howell spoke about the importance of everyone seeing art. There was a vote, I think to dismiss the petition, it's hard to follow what's going on from the balcony, all the Conservatives put their hands up and the motion was carried.

In the debate on the Petition, Council Leader David Renard told councillors that the Cabinet Member for Culture and Heritage was keeping an open mind about the decision to move the collections to the Civic Offices, and that the proposal by South Swindon Parish would be evaluated to see whether it would be acceptable to the Cabinet and the Council as a whole. SBC response to the petition 22 09 2021 as quoted on BBC Radio Wiltshire:

“Since the building was closed at the start of the pandemic its condition has deteriorated which would cost a lot of money to fix. In order to ensure Swindon’s collection continues to be visited, the council’s cabinet has agreed to authorise council officers to evaluate if Swindon Museum and Art Gallery collections could be temporarily housed in the Civic Offices. The civic offices would provide larger more accessible facilities with space for talks, events, school groups and tours, ensuring that much more of the art is available to view. The potential display of some of the collection alongside our accredited museum at Lydiard House will also be assessed.”

www.friendsofsmag.blogspot.com has information about the campaign, including photos.

Below are excerpts from articles published in the Swindon Advertiser about our campaign to re-open Apsley House, over the last month:

4th October

South Swindon's museum rescue plan snubbed by borough council

A lifeline could be thrown to Apsley House, the home of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery by South Swindon Parish Council.

But it looks unlikely Swindon Borough Council will grasp it.

South Swindon councillors agreed unanimously to put a proposal to take over the building in Bath Road and re-open the museum and gallery to the borough council.

The plan would be to make the repairs necessary to re-open the building with its exhibits and also to bring in the Old Town library as a way of encouraging more people through the door.

Chairman of the parish council Chris Watts said: “This was agreed cross party. The idea is to consolidate it with Old Town library, which would bring more people to it.

“We think we can re-open it and turn it around, as we did with Old Town library, particularly for education and purposes.

“It’s very important to the people of Old Town and the people of Swindon that we have the museum and gallery open.”

Coun Watts said it wasn’t just residents who were keen to see the museum and gallery re-open. “We’ve had a letter from the chairman of the Old Town Traders’ association saying how important it is for the area.”

The parish council’s proposal would see it given a short-term lease of up to 10 years for the building and the £400,000 the borough council had set aside for repairs to Apsley House.

But despite borough council leader David Renard saying last week that his administration would listen to any proposal the parish council had, it appears unlikely that it will proceed with South Swindon’s offer.

Cabinet member for leisure and culture Rob Jandy said it was keen to move ahead with its agreed plan to show more of the art collection and artefacts upstairs in the Civic Offices in Euclid Street, as well as in pop-up galleries, until a new purpose-built museum and gallery could be built.

The council is aiming to have that done as part of its cultural quarter plans within the decade.

Coun Jandy said: “We were interested to hear what the parish council’s proposition entailed but, as a council, it is imperative we make the best use of our assets on behalf of the Swindon taxpayer.

"We cannot spend a large amount of money repairing Apsley House only to hand it to the parish council because the money from the sale of the building will be needed to support the new cultural quarter including the new Art and Museum Pavilion.

"This has been discussed extensively and agreed by cabinet.

He said: "Our ability to make the best use of the museum and art gallery's fantastic and extensive collection, has been severely compromised by the condition of Apsley House.

"The issues with the backlog of maintenance have been widely reported not to mention the upgrades to heating and importantly, the improvements required to assist with accessibility. This stifles and inhibits the Council's ability to maximise the visibility of the collections and develop both educational programmes and commercial activities.

"We therefore need a venue which helps us achieve these objectives in the medium-term while we move towards delivering the cultural quarter for Swindon. The expectation would be that any medium-term solution must provide a level of accessibility and display that is higher than the current provision at Apsley House.

"The many problems associated with Apsley House will not be alleviated with a change in guardianship. We firmly believe that the new civic venue will provide increased display space compared to Apsley House, improved accessibility, more opportunity for increased education and group activities, in a central location with plentiful parking.

"In contrast the parish council's proposal would necessitate significant improvements to Apsley House which could not be opened whilst any works are ongoing and would also remove the only two disabled accessible rooms in the current museum by converting them to strategic book space, meaning the proportion of the collections that can be displayed would be reduced, thus resulting in more of our collections having to be put into storage."

12th October

Emptying of closed Swindon Museum and Art Gallery has begun

As the fight to keep Apsley House for the Swindon Museum and Art Gallery continues, the council has begun the process of removing the building's historic objects.

Labour councillors Jane Milner-Barry and Paul Dixon were granted access to the closed museum and noted several of the displays had already been emptied.

Despite a petition gathering thousands of signatures, Swindon Borough Council is planning to sell the Grade II-listed building in Old Town and move its collections to Euclid Street.

"Two SBC museum service staff showed us round the building," said Coun Milner-Barry.

"The temporary displays in the two ground floor rooms on either side of the front door had been dismantled and removed or boxed up.

"In the lower room at the back of the building, the Victorian fire engine was still there and the glass, bottles and ephemera in the display cabinet. There were some packing cases in the room.

"Upstairs, the art gallery is empty. The last exhibition in the main gallery had been a photographic exhibition and we were told that those exhibits have been returned to their owners.

"Most of the paintings and ceramics in the collection must now be offsite. Almost all the objects in the long archaeology gallery had been removed. Further up, the crocodile and the mummy were still there, with the surrounding displays.

"There is evidence of damp in the archaeology gallery and in one of the offices.

"The SBC staff stated that it had been necessary to move the artworks and museum objects into storage to protect them while the repairs and maintenance were carried out."

"The managers of the shops adjoining Apsley House had had a letter from SBC warning them that there would be lorries parked at the back of Apsley House during a working day the previous week."

A spokesperson from Swindon Borough Council said: “Our museum collections are regularly transported between storage locations and we have artwork on display at the civic offices and STEAM. We also have items stored at various locations in Swindon which are secure and approved for such use by our trained professional curatorial staff.

“For security reasons we are unable to divulge all the locations of our storage facilities, but any artwork removed from Apsley House will be either displayed or stored in conditions at least as favourable as those in Apsley.

“Any moves are always overseen by trained curatorial staff and are undertaken to rotate displays, or to ensure that the works are housed in suitable accommodation, where they are unlikely to be at risk of damage.

“It goes without saying that all items that are moved are correctly curated and packaged to avoid damage. These types of moves occur very regularly and have done so for many years.

“The condition of Apsley House is not currently suitable for the storage of fine works of art and, in accord with normal practise, a number of items have been removed to other council storage facilities.”

The costs of moving museum items to the civic offices and the work needed to repair Apsley House will be discussed at a cabinet meeting on December 1.

21st October

Swindon council sees 'no reason' to keep listed museum and gallery building

Scaffolding now covers the face of Apsley House in Old Town as workers for Swindon Borough Council get it ready to be put on the market.

But some have questioned the wisdom of rushing to sell the former home of Swindon Museum and Art Gallery quite so soon.

Dr Barbara Swann, a supporter of keeping the museum and gallery in the Grade-II listed Regency building in Bath Road, quizzed council leader David Renard

She said: “Can you explain the financial logic of selling off Apsley House, a substantial piece of property in a prime location, at a time when interest rates on cash deposits are very low, to part-fund a project that has no starting date as yet?

“Given that property is the one asset that historically increases substantially in value, what is the financial argument for selling the building now? Surely it makes far better sense to make the necessary repairs, which we understand are being made in order to make it saleable, but then to hang on to it so the council can get maximum benefit from its future appreciation in value?

She added the length of time before the planned building of a new gallery and museum in the cultural quarter meant it made more sense to keep Apsley House and sell it for more money when the money is needed.

She said: “The earliest that work can start on the cultural quarter site is 2026 after the bus boulevard has been completed and the existing bus station cleared away.

“So why does the council need the money from the sale of Apsley House now?”

Coun Renard said: “The sale of Apsley House is required to contribute to a new permanent facility in the town centre.

“It will make a small contribution to the cultural quarter as a whole, but a potentially significant contribution to an art pavilion in the cultural quarter or a relocated museum elsewhere.

“There is a need to move quickly with the sale of Apsley House to enable a solution to be delivered that will minimise the time that the collections spend in a temporary location.

The costs of repairing Apsley House are significant and the problems of disabled access into the majority of the building were detailed at the previous cabinet and scrutiny meetings.

“The council cannot make Apsley House legally compliant, and we cannot continue to permanently operate a facility in a building that does not enable access for all.”

Coun Renard said it might not be the case the council could sell the building for more in a few years if it held on to it.

"There is no guarantee that the value of the building would increase if it were retained," he said.

"Buildings deteriorate quite quickly when they are empty, especially so in this instance as the building is listed, so there are holding costs for maintenance and for security.

"In the circumstances, there is nothing to justify the council retaining ownership of the building."

22nd October

'Don't sell now' say Swindon museum and gallery campaigners

Campaigners who have been battling to have Swindon and Art Gallery re-open at Apsley House in Bath Road are not convinced by Swindon Borough Council's reasons for selling it.

The council is emptying the building of its artworks and is making repairs to the grade II-listed building in order to sell it. It is working on a plan to show the collections of art and artefacts in the upper floors of the Civic offices in Euclid Street.

When asked why it was so keen to sell Apsley House, council leader David Renard told one of the campaigners Dr Barbara Swann that the money would help fund a new art pavilion in the cultural quarter the council has planned and there is no justification for the authority to keep the building.

Members of the group Save our Museum and Art Gallery don't agree. A spokesman said: "We absolutely support the concept of establishing a cultural quarter, to include a museum and art gallery, in Swindon's town centre. The fact that so many of our 5,000 plus supporters, who live in many different areas in the borough, worked in voluntary and professional capacities to support the 2017 Heritage Lottery Fund bid to build a new museum and art gallery in that very area demonstrates our passion to have a central cultural quarter."

But the group takes issue with Coun Renard's point that the value of the building might go down if the council holds on to it.

Its spokesman said: "There's no guarantee about almost anything in life, but history shows that property that is properly maintained very much tends to increase in value.

"We are not proposing that Apsley House remain empty, to deteriorate – we are urging the council to take South Swindon Parish Council up on its offer to taking on a lease and running it. That way, the council can sell Apsley House for a far larger sum when everything is in place to start on the art pavilion in the cultural quarter.

"If the council sells Apsley House now, the money will sit in an account earning very little interest, while the cost of a potential Art Pavilion will almost certainly go up as inflation bites, and construction costs rise. By the council's own admission, the cultural quarter is years away from happening, and by the time it does the contribution from the sale will make will be a drop in the ocean."

The group compares Apsley House, which dates back to the 1830s, with other important historic buildings like The Mechanics' Institute and Corn Exchange, which the council does not own: "It does own Apsley House. It can control that building's future, at least until its vision for the town centre is realised. Let the parish council take a lease on it and run it in the meantime, rather than sell it to a speculative developer and risk its going the same way as those other historically significant buildings."

With thanks to the Swindon Advertiser.