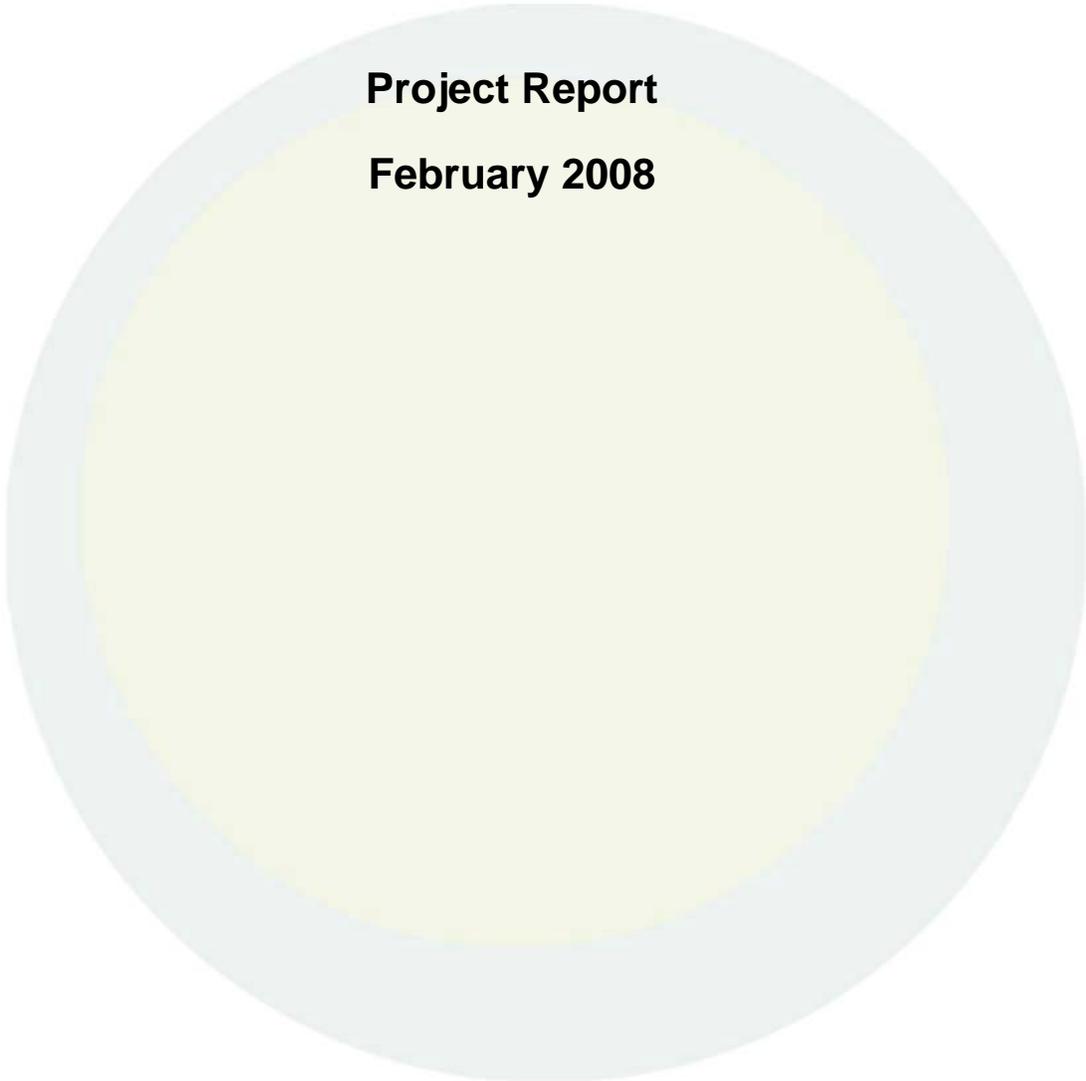




# **Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life Children and Young People's Consultation**

A **playtrain** children's consultation project



## **Project Report**

### **February 2008**

# Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life

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# Introduction

The Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life reopened to the public in September 2006 following renovation and refurbishment. The museum's exhibitions were redesigned and additions such as a new shop were included.

PlayTrain was commissioned by the museum to design and undertake a day long consultation exercise with 9 – 14 year olds from the local community. In particular the museum was keen to develop an understanding how it could attract more visitors from this age group by finding out which elements of the visiting experience are appealing, which are less appealing and what changes could be made. The museum was clear that recommendations made by young people should be realistic, practical and affordable and that participants should understand this.

## **playtrain**

**playtrain** is the leading provider of hands-on training, creative children's consultations and research for organisations working with and for children and young people. **playtrain** aims to promote the creative potential of children to help make childhood an inspiring journey of discovery and provide children and young people with a voice concerning matters affecting them.

# Aims

The aims of the consultation were informed by the brief provided by the museum and were:

- To design and deliver a fun and creative consultation experience for young people aged 9 – 14
- To consult with participants around the following key questions and themes:
  - A general review of the museum's appeal to 9 – 14 year olds
  - An analysis of which elements of the museum are appealing to the age group and which are less so.
  - How might 9 – 14 year olds be attracted to the museum?
  - A review of the 2008 events programme and suggestions for other appropriate events
  - An appraisal of the current window display and suggestions for appropriate changes
- To develop a series of recommendations based upon the feedback from young people.
- To produce a report documenting the process and the views of the young people who participated in the consultation.

# Consultation Process

The consultation day took place on Friday February 15<sup>th</sup> 2008 during half term school holidays. The museum invited young people to attend the consultation with a group of 11 young people participating on the day. The group comprised 5 girls and 6 boys. The ages of participants ranged from 8 to 14 years although 10 of the group were aged between 8 and 11. A number of the young people had been involved in previous activities organised by the museum with a number members of the museum club. All the young people had visited the museum before.

On the day that the consultation took place a 'Victorian Spring Clean' event was also programmed. There were also additional volunteers in period dress showing and talking to visitors about different exhibits. The study room provided the main base for activities with young people also using other spaces in the museum and outside in which to work.

To facilitate the engagement of young people in the consultation process a series of activities were designed. Whilst some activities focused on specific questions and themes other activities were used to enable the group to bond with each other build relationships with the facilitators.

## Consultation activities

The following activities were used during the day:

- 'Being Us' doodle

When young people arrived they were asked to contribute to a giant 'doodle' that had been started off by the facilitators. Participants were encouraged to doodle, scribble and draw pictures that represented their lives and interests. The activity enabled facilitators to begin informal conversations about the group and allowed participants to identify common interests.

- Ice breaker games

Throughout the day consultation activities were interspersed with games to help 'break the ice' and allow the group a chance to have fun and relax. Games included (for outlines see appendix):

- The finger game
- 1 to 10
- Look up, look down
- Chilly Willy
- Passing a tap

- Museum walkabout

Participants were divided into 2 groups and spent 45 minutes on 'walkabout' in the museum. Young people were provided with stickers on which they were asked to record things that interested them and/or that they thought would appeal to other young people their age. The stickers were used later to theme participants' feedback. The exercise was designed to give the whole group, and facilitators, common points of reference to inform the consultation and to capture initial thoughts and feelings.

- Dragons' Den Museum

In small groups participants were asked to design a museum for 9 – 14 year olds and then pitch this idea to the rest of the group. The group, or 'dragons', were allowed to ask 5 clarifying questions about the design. This exercise was intended to help participants think creatively about what *they* would prioritise if planning a museum from scratch. The activity offers clues about the elements of the museum visiting experience that motivated and interested young people.

- Keep, change, add and improve

To generate feedback regarding the museum's window display the group spent some time outside looking at the window. Then, using a giant piece of card, the group were asked to think about and record elements of the window display that they felt should be kept, changed, added or improved. This exercise was designed to provide a framework for young people to structure their thoughts and feedback around this question.

- Event league table

Events from the museum's 2008 programme were written on large pieces of card. In 2 groups young people were asked to organise the events into a league table with those that appealed most to them at the top. Whilst the group had little information from which to respond the activity captured their immediate reactions to the different activities and events that had been programmed. The process of organising the league table created the opportunity for discussion about what types of events and activities appeal to the 9 – 14 year old age group.

- Recommendation brainstorm

For the final activity young people were asked to 'brainstorm' recommendations for the museum based upon the previous elements of the day. This was done in small groups with plenary feedback. To retain

the attention of the group this session was punctuated with quick games and puzzles. The exercise enabled the group to draw all the day's feedback into a fundamental set of recommendations and wishes that reflected their experience of visiting the museum.

## **Documentation**

The material (pictures, doodles, flip charts etc) produced during the activities were taken away and recorded after the session by the facilitators and are included in the appendix. In addition facilitators made notes during the day to capture comments, themes and observations.

# Findings

The following section of the report provides an overview and analysis of the feedback produced by each consultation activity undertaken on the day. In addition to the feedback generated through activities facilitators observed the way the group engaged with the museum and with each other and listened to the conversations that took place. Information derived in this way has been integrated within the analysis below.

## Being Us

- *What were the general interests of the young people involved in the consultation?*

The interests identified in the activity were those that one might expect of a group of 9 – 14 year olds. Common areas of interest were:

- Sports, especially football
- Looking after animals
- Music, modern rock and alternative
- Science fiction, Dr Who
- Hanging out with friends

In addition some young people identified 'history' as a particular interest. On questioning this interest seemed to be stimulated by lessons at school and tended to focus upon specific periods including, Romans, Vikings, Tudors and World War Two. Some of the young people also expressed an interest in finding out about Thetford culture and life.

There was a general agreement that Thetford lacked opportunities for young people to meet each other and pursue their interests in more detail. In particular the group said that there were few clubs to join and specifically that such provision did not give them the chance to simply 'hang out' and 'have fun'. A recurring tension for young people seemed to be between a desire to have free time for unstructured activity with their friends and to have structured and age appropriate provision.

The eleven young people present should not be assumed to be representative of all young people in Thetford or indeed more widely. It was noted that the group did not include any young people drawn from the Portuguese community nor from other minority ethnic communities

- *Why did young people visit the museum?*

In addition, participants were asked to introduce themselves and to state why they chose to visit the museum. Young people gave a range of responses to this question including:

- Having an interest in history and wanting to find out more
- Being taken by parents
- Attending specific activities or events
- To go to the shop
- A place to go with friends

The group said not all of their friends went to Ancient House Museum, and they assumed young people instead visited museums nearer where they live.

## **Museum walkabout**

Young people were divided into two groups and spent 45 minutes going around the museum accompanied by the facilitators. Young people were given as much freedom as possible in determining where they went and how they engaged with the exhibitions and guides. The group were all given stickers, cameras and pens with which to record the things that interested them most.

The feedback recorded by the group (see appendix) indicates that it was specific facts or items that they were particularly interested by rather than whole rooms or exhibitions. The most popular were:

- The stuffed animals
- The well
- The coffins
- The gift shop
- Exhibits that could be touched or opened
- Outdoor area

Facilitators observed the way that the group toured the museum. In general young people approached the exhibitions in an unstructured fashion often moving from room to room quickly until something or someone grabbed their attention. Commonly, young people did not read the labels on displays and when asked reinforced the fact that they did not like to do this. When asked young people often did not have a sense of theme of a room where this was not obvious, for example the room to the left on entering the museum. In this room young people were drawn to specific objects liked the stuffed birds and the coffin but did not understand why these items were collected together in the room. Instead young people developed their own systems for interpretation amongst each other often making jokes about them or responding instinctively with sounds like 'urgh', 'yuck', or 'wow'.

When participants were in a room with a visitor guide dressed in period costume they always stayed longer and were more engaged in the exhibits. Young people enjoyed both asking questions and answering those posed by the guides. Again young people were particularly engaged by stories that had an element of horror or awe to them. A particular example of this was in the Great Hall where a guide told the group about how Tudors would suck the brains of a chicken out through its beak!

The young people were also interested in being able to work in the museum either as volunteers or shadowing staff. They felt young people could work with the adult volunteers as well as find out more about working in a museum.

## Dragon's Den Museum

Participants worked in groups of 2, 3 or 4 to design a museum that would appeal to them and other young people their age. Each group then 'pitched' their ideas to the others who had the opportunity to ask questions. It was explained to the group that this activity was not about redesigning the Ancient House Museum but rather about getting them to think creatively about what is important to them in a museum and what would attract young people of their ages.

Despite working separately some common themes arose from the exercise.

- *Zones*

All the designs were divided into different and definite zones or areas with clear themes and activities attached to them.

It was important that exhibitions changed regularly either by introducing a whole new exhibition or by introducing new exhibits. No visit should be the same each time.

- *Experience, theatre and performance*

Three of the designs included a space for people to perform plays. In particular young people expressed an interest in being part of these plays or re-enactments. This was related to a common interest in dressing up which was present in all the designs.

A somewhat related element of the designs was an interest in highly experiential areas of the museum in which visitors would feel immersed in history. One design included a ghost and torture area in which actors would scare visitors – "if they wanted to go in". A second design included a Roman area which mimicked a Roman town. It would give visitors the chance to eat Roman food, go in a Roman baths and even use a Roman toilet!

Other ideas included giving 'names' to the different room which related to the contents or to a theme. The young people were also interested in social history, in particular life during the second world war.

- *Arts and crafts*

Some designs included spaces for people to do arts and craft activities. They also suggested using art more to explain museum items, for example one suggestion was to create a picture time line with no text.

Many also wanted design features as part of the museum structure and the majority of the group were interested in exploring how the architecture of the

museum could be enhanced e.g. designing new windows, creating new annexes to old buildings.

- *More than history*

Some designs seemed to reflect a desire that the museum do more teach the visitor about history. Opportunities to eat, relax, hang out with friends and shop were all introduced in different designs. This was particularly reflected in designs by older girls. It was important that chairs, benches and bean bags available so they could sit and meet together and feel comfortable.

Many of the young people wanted additional services including a good shop which included local arts and crafts to buy such as jewellery (i.e. even more of what is already in the Ancient House Museum shop). One suggestion was to have market days at the museum where young designers could sell reasonably priced items.

- *Hands on*

As reflected above a common theme was that ideal museums would be highly interactive with plenty of exhibits that could be touched, played with and experienced. One suggestion was an exhibition of coins that could be touched. Again the idea of dressing up in historical costume was very popular.

Some young people said it would be good if more toys were available and there were things to do and play with inside and outdoors. They thought toys should be available which were appropriate for all ages including young teenagers.

- *The future*

It was important to the groups that the museum was not something entirely about the past but a place that reflected the future also. In one design this was reflected in the contemporary design of the building, in another in the inclusion of a cyber-café and in a third the development of a 'future zone' with predictions about new technology and advancements in science.

Another suggestion was for an arm chair which could give you a 'speed tour' of the museum.

- *Cost*

In asking questions about other's designs some further themes emerged. The group were keen to know what the cost of entrance would be. Between £1 and £2 for children and young people seemed to be an acceptable amount.

- *Additional issues*

The group had an interesting debate about how gender specific the museum's focus should be. Younger participants had clear notions that an ideal museum would provide exhibits for girls and some for boys. The type of exhibits suggested for each gender generally conformed to stereotype with exhibitions about war, guns and torture for boys and fashion and shopping for girls. Older participants expressed the view that such gender stereotyping was problematic and that both girls and boys might be interested in some or all of the above.

A final set of questions seemed to concern the practicalities of execution of the design but also sought to 'test out' just how interactive the design really was. For example, 'would you actually be able to make the food and eat it?' It was important to the group that promises of a particular level or nature of involvement should be realised in reality so as not to disappoint the visitor.

## Window display: keep, change, add and improve

In two groups participants were accompanied outside the front of the museum to look at the current window display. On the day of the consultation the display included items relating to a Victorian washing day such as a washing line, items of clothing, soap and washing paraphernalia. Back inside, the group were asked to structure their feedback using a keep, change, add or improve framework.

The group's feedback under the above headings is included in the appendix. The group felt that there were a range of factors that could help to improve the window's function in attracting young people to the museum.

- *Keep*

Whilst the group were not scathing in their critique of the window display they failed to identify many things that should be kept. The group felt that the washing line was good and liked the 'old' feel of the window itself. Reflecting on the museum walkabout it might be noted that the nature of the items in the window were not those that particularly caught the attention of the group.

Importantly the group said that it should be made to 'look like a museum'. It was important to them that the museum should not try and pretend to be a shop front or a notice board- it should 'contain history'.

- *Change*

The group felt that the window could have been lit more brightly and using different colours giving it greater impact. It was suggested that the shutters could be opened allowing people to see into the great hall which was viewed as one of the museums key assets. One young person was particularly vehement that the metal cheese grater should be removed as it he felt it was not historically accurate.

- *Improve*

To improve the current window display the group felt that it might be made clearer as to why the particular theme of washing had been chosen. The link between the spring clean and Victorian washing day events were evidently not obvious to the group.

The group felt that signage could be improved generally and signs that appealed directly to young people might be included. The participants suggested that it should be made clear that entry to the museum was free and that bigger and more eye catching writing could be used.

Another suggestion was to make the word 'museum' bigger on the external sign to the museum. It currently says Ancient House but some of the group said that without the word 'museum', some people may not know what it is.

- *Add*

Again the group felt that the window would benefit from the inclusion of more colour and somehow be given a greater wow factor! The group suggested that some of the museums 'best' exhibits should be included in the window such as the Viking helmet, the coffin and the Thetford treasure. The group were mindful that being in the window could put the exhibits at risk and said that replicas could be used instead.

Reflecting the discussion (above) about boys and girls interests some members of the group felt that the window should show things that appealed specifically to different genders.

The group suggested that a clear plan of the museums programme of events should be included. In addition the group said that the window should include pictures or images showing young people enjoying and engaging in different activities at the museum. It could also include their artwork, but they wanted it to be artwork inspired from museum visits rather than just a general exhibition space. In short the window should send a message that the museum was welcoming to young people and had something to offer them.

## Event Programme 2008 – league table

In two groups participants were asked to organise the events programme into a 'league table' based upon the degree to which young people felt that the events were appealing to them and their age group. The two groups came up with somewhat different responses although some common themes emerged from the discussions.

Both groups placed events that referred to craft activities low down their tables. When asked, participants said that these sounded 'babyish' and were not for their age group. Following further discussions young people said that they did want to do crafts but that they needed to sound interesting and maybe be quite specifically explained.

As a general rule the groups seemed to make judgements about each event based on whether the activity or topic sounded 'hard' or 'easy'. Events that sounded 'easy' were deemed to be aimed at younger children. The sophistication of event's contents seemed to correlate with areas of history that had been covered at school. For example if WW2 was covered in year 8 then this was deemed to be appropriate content for a young person at this age.

The participants struggled to place some events where activities were not clearly identified e.g. Victorian washing day. In such instances young people wanted more information about what activities were involved. When asked about what sort of information should be included the group said that it should be quite specific so that they could make a clear judgement about whether they would like it or not. The group also thought that additional information such as whether lunch was included was also important.

The group were asked to think about other events or activities that they would like to see included in the programme. The suggestions reflected previous feedback and included re-enactment events and opportunities to dress up. The group felt that the activities should be challenging and their feedback again suggested a desire for programming that could shock or surprise them. One participant said that the events 'should have an unexpected twist!'

With all of the events the young people wanted more involvement in the running and delivery of events. They were interested in volunteering but also finding out more about the secret places in the museum. They suggested that a 'behind the scenes' workshop would offer them a chance to see the non public parts of the museum including the office spaces.

## Recommendations

Based upon the activities and discussions throughout the day the group were asked to think about what their key recommendations would be for the Ancient House Museum. Again, young people were reminded of the need for their recommendations to be realistic. The recommendations produced by the group are listed below.

### The recommendations

The group developed the following recommendations that they felt would help the museum to appeal to more 9 – 14 year olds

- We would like there to be more things to touch and feel. We liked the feel boxes but would like there to be more things that are gooey or yucky so that you get a shock.
- We would like there to be more chances to dress up in costumes
- We would like there to be more plays and more chances to be in plays and re-enactments
- We would like there to be more stuff to try e.g. it would be good if you could actually try the food from different times
- We would like there to be a tank with well shrimps in it so you can see them alive
- All the things on display should be old – if it is not it should say that it is a replica
- We think the museum should display some of the best objects in the window
- We would like the museum to start a youth club and a parents club
- We would like young people to be in charge of the museum for a week
- We would like there to be larger words on the signs outside and more colour in the window and have clear information about the timetable of events, opening times and costs.
- We would like there to be a clear way around the museum and a character to show you round – like a skaterboy

- We would like there to be more special effects
- We would like a comfy chill out zone where you could read a book or watch a DVD or hang out
- We would like there to be DVDs which young people have made about history. We would like there to be film nights on different times in history.
- We would like there to be areas to interest boys and girls
- We would like there to be an after-school museum club. If we ran the club we would have horrible histories, jokes, drinks and biscuits and insane craft
- We would like there to be more Information about stuffed animals like how they were killed
- We would like there to be people dressed up in costume outside to encourage people to come in
- We would like there to be a lunch area and somewhere that sells food
- We would like there to be a Nintendo Wii that you could play historical games on like take part in a battle
- We would like there to be an art room to do art and crafts in
- We would like there to be less words to read

# Conclusions

## Overview of recommendation themes

Whilst the group developed a number of individual recommendations some key themes can be identified in their thinking. The following themes may help to focus development and planning of the Museum's programming for young people aged 9 – 14.

- *Clubs*

Young people frequently referred to *clubs* as a key way in which they would like to access the museum. Clubs provide young people with relatively structured environments that are both outside school and away from family. Furthermore, clubs help to provide young people with a sense of belonging within a particular setting and help foster a sense of ownership and identification. The clubs referred to by young people would specifically offer them the opportunity to undertake fun activities in the museum setting. Whilst there would be a focus on history the club would also meet other social needs by providing a service that young people said they could not access elsewhere in Thetford.

- *Experiences – being involved and immersed*

A recurrent theme was young people's interest in highly experiential activities and exhibitions. This was reflected in young people's interest in dressing up and getting physically involved in the re-enactment of history. Young people wanted to try out the objects they were being shown, cook and taste the food and be scared, shocked and surprised.

- *Authenticity – of objects and experience*

Authenticity was important to young people. Their feedback reflected a desire to know when objects are 'real' and when they are 'replicas'. Furthermore, young people liked to know the story behind specific objects particularly when those objects had a particular role in history – for example the piece of Zeppelin.

The collection exhibition was popular however some of the young people were unsure about its authenticity and did not know if they were 'real' items. However they liked the exhibitions and the pictures which related to local people but this connection needs to be made more obvious.

- *"If it's just about history I'll be bored" (space to hang out, music, food)*

Whilst some of the young people described their own personal interest in history they also suggested that other young people may be less interested and that as

such the museum would need to appeal to young peoples' other interests and needs if it wanted to attract them. This point is somewhat reflected in relation to the *club* theme. It was clear that a visit to the museum needed to be more than a 'dry' history lesson (the group felt that the museum had already achieved this). Young people wanted a place to 'hang out with friends', 'eat lunch' and 'chill out'. The group recognised that this was not the primary role of the museum but felt that it was important that museum management recognised that these are all things that young people like to do.

The young people also felt that a museum was not a place where you regularly visit, and that people should be realistic about how often a young person might visit and this should not necessarily be seen as a negative response to the museum. One way of encouraging young people to get involved in the museum more was to ensure the museum could be accessed through external events. The young people felt the museum could be more widely advertised including in places such as the tourism office and the town centre; but also it would be good if the museum were able to come out to places where young people got together e.g. parks.

- *Young people as co-producers of the museum experience*

Reflecting the interest in being immersed in history, young people also wanted to get involved in running the museum, seeing behind the scenes and making decisions.

- *A museum that is intuitive to young people*

It was clear from feedback and observation that the group did not always find the museum intuitive to navigate and use. As indicated above the group frequently needed an explanation to understand what was in a particular room and why.

## **Taking things forward**

"Makes you proud in a way of why you live and work in Thetford"

This was a comment made by one young person about why the museum is important to young people. It was clearly part of their community and they were keen to take an active role in how Ancient House makes decisions in the future.

The group engaged well during the day and were able to provide constructive feedback to the museum in line with the aims described above. The museum may wish to share the report or an action plan developed from it with the young people who were involved on the day. In addition it may be helpful to re-engage the group around specific plans that have been developed or to test out or pilot ideas on a small scale.

Tom Howell , Janet Hetherington  
Feb 2008

## Appendix – Feedback from activities

### What do young people like in Thetford?

Stuff to do
A Place to hang out with their friends
Projects
Fun things to do
Chocolate
Clubs
Things to do with people our own age

### Museum Walkabout

#### Things that young people liked

Stuffed animals *****
Animated timeline*
Coffin ( indoor)****
Viking helmet*
Giftshop***
Well*****
The smell in the ground floor*
Stuff about the jail house on the stairs
Tudor house torture equipment
Bed bugs
Sugar made into objects
Horse hair
Mini sewing machine (in collection)
Liked the stories about the food the Tudors ate especially sucking the brains of the bird through the beak/ roasting**
The kitchen
Things we can touch***** ( e.g opening the lids on things)
Things we can try on
Jewellery
Roman treasure
Local photos
Activities to do
Being told interesting facts
The guns
The stories about cleaning*
The model of the Ancient House Museum
The film room
The telephones with information ( but they were too long)
Tools you can pick up

Famous Balloon Bomb
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**Museum Walkabout  
Suggestions**

In the front room the information for the coffin was not clear and we could not find it.
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Unsure whether you could touch things or not
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Are things real or replicas?
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How were the dead animals killed?
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It would be good if we could have music – bongo drums
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Make the shrimp well more clearer
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More maps to show where things are
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**Dragons Den**

***Themes***

Ghost area; ghost tower with people there to scare you and play pranks
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Arts and creativity
---------------------

The tudor house
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Romans - toilets, play, weapons, making a pyramid
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The future- what it might be like
-----------------------------------

Animal zone with extinct animals in it
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***Facilities and attractions***

A theatre where you could perform plays
-----------------------------------------

A collection of coins which you could play with
-------------------------------------------------

A world war 2 area- with examples of uniforms (which you could try on), guns
------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Lots of free creative activities- activities which linked to the favourite things- food, shopping and fashion
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Lots of chances to try things on, and do things and make things with your friends
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

A performance area with clothes you could try on; separate changing rooms for boys and girls and a chance to perform to an audience including your parents
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Room with different films about history
-----------------------------------------

Small 'dolls house of what the museum looked like in the olden days
---------------------------------------------------------------------

A food garden
---------------

'The old time lounge' – with a couch, chair and toys
------------------------------------------------------

A kitchen which you can cook in and eat with the food which is cooked in it
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------

Interesting windows
---------------------

Accessible- disabled doors
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New technology
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Somewhere to sit and chat
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Cyber restaurant
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## Events league table

	Group 1	Group 2
1	Treasure Hunt	Awe-ful archaeology
2	Meet the tudors	Thetford 1940s weekend
3	Roman Myths and legends	Meet the tudors
4	Roman storytelling	Roman Myths and Legends
5	Awe-ful archaeology	We'll eat again
6	Thetford in the forties	Treasure Hunt
7	Victorian washing day	Roman Storytelling and craft
8	We'll eat again	Fantasy amps of Norfolk
9	Thetford in the ime of Thomas Painwalk	Victorian spring clean
10	Victorian spring clean	Thetford in the time of Thomas Painwolk
11	Paint your own easter egg	The ginger bread man
12	The ginger bread man story time and crafts	Paint your own easter eggs
13	Fantasy maps and Norfolk	Paint your own washing day

## Window Display: Keep, change, add and improve

### **Keep**

Some of the Victorian stuff
Basic design of the window – it looks really old
The washing line

### **Change**

The modern cheese grater
Open the shutters so you can see in
Change the lighting- brighter and use different colours
Change it to make it children and youth friendly
Showing pictures to demonstrate that children and young people come here and enjoy it

### **Improve**

Make it more colourful
------------------------

Examples of the most interesting exhibits
Improve the sign
Make it clear it is free admission
Bigger writing

***Add***

Some of the interesting exhibits - the Viking helmet, the Thetford treasure, the coffin
Diary of what is on the year
Things that specifically appeal to boys and girls