

Preliminary Review

By: Wild Garlic Training Ltd

Date: 3 April 2016

For: The Making of Mashamshire

Brief: To examine the actual and potential market, desire and opportunities for further development of community heritage provision in Masham and the wider area through the establishment of a community heritage centre.

Preamble

The Making of Mashamshire [“the Organisation”] is a community incorporated organisation promoting community heritage activities in and around the North Yorkshire market town of Masham. The Organisation has been active for three years, accumulating collections of historic papers, photographs and memorabilia, and running activities including: public slideshows of a local photographic archive; curriculum work with schoolchildren at primary and secondary level; project work with “gifted and talented” students at a local secondary school; recording of oral history with older local residents; and intergenerational sharing work with these residents and primary school children. Volunteers from the Organisation are also engaged in archiving historical papers at the North Yorkshire Country Records Office. For six months in 2013-14 the Organisation had the pro bono use of a local shopfront, where papers and photographs were on display to the public and volunteers worked on cataloguing their collection of some 25,000 legal papers.

The Making of Mashamshire is run by a voluntary board of trustees, and staffed by one employee who is paid on a project basis as funding permits, and a number of volunteers who assist on all the activities listed above. The Organisation has commissioned this preliminary review to inform its future development.

Aim of the review

The Organisation wishes to establish the level of potential engagement within their geographical area of interest in community heritage activities, and to establish the potential usership for a permanent public-facing community heritage centre. Alongside a simple quantitative survey of local residents, they have engaged Wild Garlic Training Ltd to talk to actual and potential stakeholders in this work, in order to establish whether there is a market for the Organisation’s activities going forward, and if so, which activities should be focused on and how a permanent facility could enable the Organisation’s development to meet that market. Wild Garlic talked to 49 individuals about (as appropriate): their experience of the Organisation’s policy, practice and delivery; the potential for further work with or by the Organisation; and the concept of setting up a community heritage centre for Masham.

Consultations

Wild Garlic met with a number of current and potential stakeholders to establish their level of interest in The Making of Mashamshire's existing activity and potential future developments. These were:

Education Providers

The Headteacher of Masham CE Primary School was an enthusiastic supporter of the Organisation's work, and the benefits that it had brought to her pupils both in terms of curriculum work and the social benefits of intergenerational projects.

Headteachers / business managers of other local primary school were consulted and all expressed an interest in working with the Organisation in future, both on a curriculum and pastoral level. The idea of taking children to a bespoke educational facility off-site and in the heart of a historic own centre was received with universal enthusiasm.

The Head of Humanities at a local secondary school whose "gifted and talented" children had taken part in a research project with the Organisation praised their diligent preparation, ability to draw high-quality work out of an initially reticent cohort, and understanding of both the educational and logistical issues involved in project work.

"Our children are fascinated by the history of the place they live in, and [the Organisation] is excellent at delivering curriculum-oriented work in this area a way that engages the children totally."

"Working offsite with [the Project Manager] and colleagues was a friendly, stress-free learning experience both for our pupils and staff!"

Statutory Bodies

North Yorkshire County Council's Stronger Communities delivery manager for the district including Masham has been in regular contact with the Organisation, and is a strong proponent of setting up a community heritage centre, both for the educational benefits available and for the benefits which would be accrued throughout the community by working with isolated vulnerable people, and particularly older men. She was clear that the Organisation would be most welcome to apply for grant money from this department – a funding pot which is available by invitation only.

The North Yorkshire County Records Office is a longstanding partner of the Organisation, and remain fully in favour of a community heritage centre.

Harrogate Borough Council's economic development officer spoke warmly if vaguely of the concept, and cited studies showing that heritage activity attracts people and money to the areas that host it. The Council's partnership and engagement officer for arts and heritage spoke warmly of the Organisation and the work which they have delivered with council funding, stating that she was confident in the Organisation's managerial ability to run a heritage centre and deliver a programme of social, educational and cultural value.

Masham Parish Council (which includes much of the rural area of Mashamshire as well) has minuted its support for a heritage centre run by the Organisation, and has offered support in areas including planning to help bring it into being. The Chair of the Council talked at great length about the benefits which a heritage centre would offer to all sectors of the population.

"Projects like this can create supportive environments for more vulnerable populations, improving their well-being and reducing low-level mental health problems which can arise from loneliness and isolation."

"[A community heritage centre] would be a great next step in the regeneration of Masham as a business and tourism hub, following the appointment of a Masham Development Manager and the regeneration of the town's market."

Community / Tourism Organisations

Mashamshire Community Office acts the local tourist information centre and is also a community, public relations and business development centre for the area. They have taken a keen interest in the organisation (whose first project was run under the community office's auspices). They regard the Organisation as a very welcome addition to the town's activities, and are enthusiastic about the possibility of the Organisation running a physical base within Masham.

"We are willing but not very able to provide information on the history of local families or buildings. It would be great to have somewhere in town that we could direct these enquiries to."

Masham has a Church of England church and Methodist chapel in town, with both organisations active in pastoral work with older and more deprived inhabitants, primarily through the Hope Community Project. This project has collaborated with the Organisation on a number of activities using and recording the memories of older people of Masham through the generations. This has involved liaison with many of the area's hardest-to-reach and most at risk individuals, including retired farmers, adults with learning difficulties, and dementia sufferers. Hope, along with both church and chapel, are keen to continue working with the Organisation, praising the Organisation's ability to use often older volunteers to draw memories out of their users, and to promote cohesion, resilience and development across the whole community.

"We would be keen to work with [the Organisation] again on pretty much any project. Our users enjoy the sessions so much and it makes them feel wanted when people ask about their memories."

[on intergenerational projects] "It is wonderful to see how enthusiastic our users can become when they realise how interested children are in their lives when they were that age."

[on a heritage centre] "Having somewhere our members could go a feel welcomed and valued outside our own sessions would be perfect and make a huge difference to their everyday lives."

Dales Tourism is a Masham-based consultancy working with small regional tourism businesses to develop the sector. They have had little to do with the Organisation this far, but their director was also very interested in the possibility of a public-facing physical base, noting as many others have that there is no town museum in Masham, and adding that one of their problems with tourism development is the lack of "wet-weather" activities in the Dales.

Masham Town Hall is an imposing public building which hosts a variety of local clubs and societies, as well as films and concerts for the benefit of local people. The Organisation worked together with the town hall on a series of public events including slideshows of archive photographs of the area, and local film footage held at the Yorkshire Film Archive. The town hall has provided space for the Organisation to hold meetings and host displays, and the Organisation provided a comprehensive exhibition of town hall history for the building's centenary in 2013. The town hall administrator regards the Organisation as a key partner and of great benefit to Masham.

"Three of the four most popular public events we have held in the last two years have been organised with [the Organisation]. There is clearly a massive appetite among local people, whether lifelong residents or 'incomers', to know and understand the history of the town, its people and its buildings. We hope to work with [the Organisation] on many more of these projects."

Masham has two major public events each year; the Steam Rally and Sheep Fair. For each of these, the Organisation has produced exhibitions based on historical archives, photographs, oral histories and news reports. The rally co-ordinator and sheep fair founder both praised the Organisation's responsiveness to requests, use of volunteers, and value added to the respective weekends by adding community history displays. The sheep fair personnel particularly hoped that a potential community heritage centre would enable the Organisation

to host a permanent display or exhibit on the centuries of sheep farming and trading for which Mashamshire is renowned.

“We very cheekily asked for a tent full of rally history and [the Organisation] did a fantastic job. Hundreds of rally visitors saw the display and I’m sure they would go to a community heritage centre if one existed. Our visitors love community and farming history and many of them travel the country looking for this sort of venue.”

Welcome to Yorkshire is the ground-breaking tourism development agency responsible among much else for bringing the Tour de France to Yorkshire (and Masham) in 2014. Their business development executive welcomed the idea of a community heritage centre warmly. She noted that their research shows that the opening similar buildings in the comparably sized village of Dent and town of Kirbymoorside generated an immediate rise in visitor numbers for businesses and attractions throughout the areas involved.

The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) is a national charity supporting farmers and farming families with financial, health and pastoral issues. They are active in Mashamshire, with several retired farmers both in villages and having moved into town. Their project officer said a potential community heritage centre would be “a godsend” for alleviating loneliness and mental health issues amongst older members of the farming community.

Local businesses

Masham has five medium-scale employers; two breweries, two agricultural feed manufacturers, and Swinton Park, a hotel and conference centre based around an 18th-century manor house. All five of these businesses are run by people with multi-generational family histories in Masham-based business, and two are represented on the Organisation’s trustee board. It is therefore not surprising that it was generally agreed that the Organisation was doing good work. One of the breweries had hosted an informative session with local schoolchildren on the social and wartime history of the company, and “*would love to do something similar again*”. The managing director of another company noted how busy the Organisation’s shopfront had been when it was open in 2013-14, and more than one suggested a similar venue would be a useful complement to tourist activity such as brewery tours, either as an addition or to keep children and non-drinkers occupied while others took full advantage of the breweries’ offers.

“We welcome visitors from quite a distance who structure a day around our tours, and interesting facility a short walk away can only help bring visitors into the town.”

“An education and history centre would enhance the town’s tourism and heritage, safeguarding local employment to the benefit of the whole community.”

Masham has around 30 small businesses, ranging from traditional market town shops such as butchers and grocers through delicatessens and sweet shops to four art galleries. There are four pubs/hotels in addition to the brewery visitor centres, and three cafés. We talked with 22 shopkeepers / business owners, often in brief ad hoc ‘over-the-counter’, situations, and the idea of trade in Masham as a collaborative and symbiotic community is clear, with the overwhelming view that any new shop or facility was good for the whole town’s economy.

“Our visitors ask about local history all the time. We can send them to the community office for books, but some sort of history centre would be perfect.” – hotelier

“I am the fourth generation in this shop, so I’d like to know more about its history, and I’ve no doubt my customers would as well.” – butcher

“My customers love talking about their childhoods and the way things were. They’d be chuffed to have somewhere they could put their memories to good use” – hairdresser.

Possible alternatives

None of the activities delivered by the Organisation over the last three years is being replicated elsewhere, and there was no indication whatsoever that the bodies which may be expected to consider replicating it (particularly county, borough and parish councils) were doing so. On the contrary, all three bodies explicitly regard the Organisation's work as both a complement to their existing provision, and filling a provision gap in the Organisation's area of benefit.

T&R Theakston Ltd, a local brewery, has an archive, and a collection of company and brewing memorabilia on display at their visitor centre. However, it is established that they have no plan or desire to expand this provision; on the contrary, their marketing manager suggested that they would be keen to work with the Organisation to find ways to make their archive material more available to the public.

The town hall has a "history room" with limited display space and a meeting table. However, this is not suitable either as an alternative to or a permanent venue for the Organisation, with many other activities, notably parish council and steam rally meetings, competing for the same space, and with the building's own historical artefacts to display.

There are a number of local history groups in and around Masham, several of which involve quite intensive historical research – e.g. the Pott and Agill Study Group, and a number of individuals working with the Nidderdale Area of Natural Beauty. Members of the Masham Local History Group have spent considerable time archiving and indexing papers from Swinton Park (local stately home) and the Masham Peculier Courts of the middle ages. While there would seem to be a possible conflict of interest here, in fact the Organisation has built useful and innovative links with and between these groups, sharing volunteer time and expertise and building an online presence. All three groups mentioned here have worked with the Organisation and approve of the community heritage centre as a venue which would benefit all local groups.

"We'd love to do something like that ourselves, but [the Organisation] has the people and the experience which we simply do not."

Conclusion

Every individual and organisation consulted agreed, enthusiastically and without reservation, that the Organisation is doing work which is useful, which contributes towards community development, and which would only benefit from the development opportunities offered by the creation of a community heritage centre. Nobody interviewed suggested either that a community heritage centre was not a good idea, or that the Organisation was not the correct body to take it forward.

Accordingly, it is the recommendation of this review that the Organisation continues researching a suitable venue for a community heritage centre and the funding to develop it.