

# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

2025-26 Year in Review

PLACE  
SERVICES



Essex County Council



# Introduction

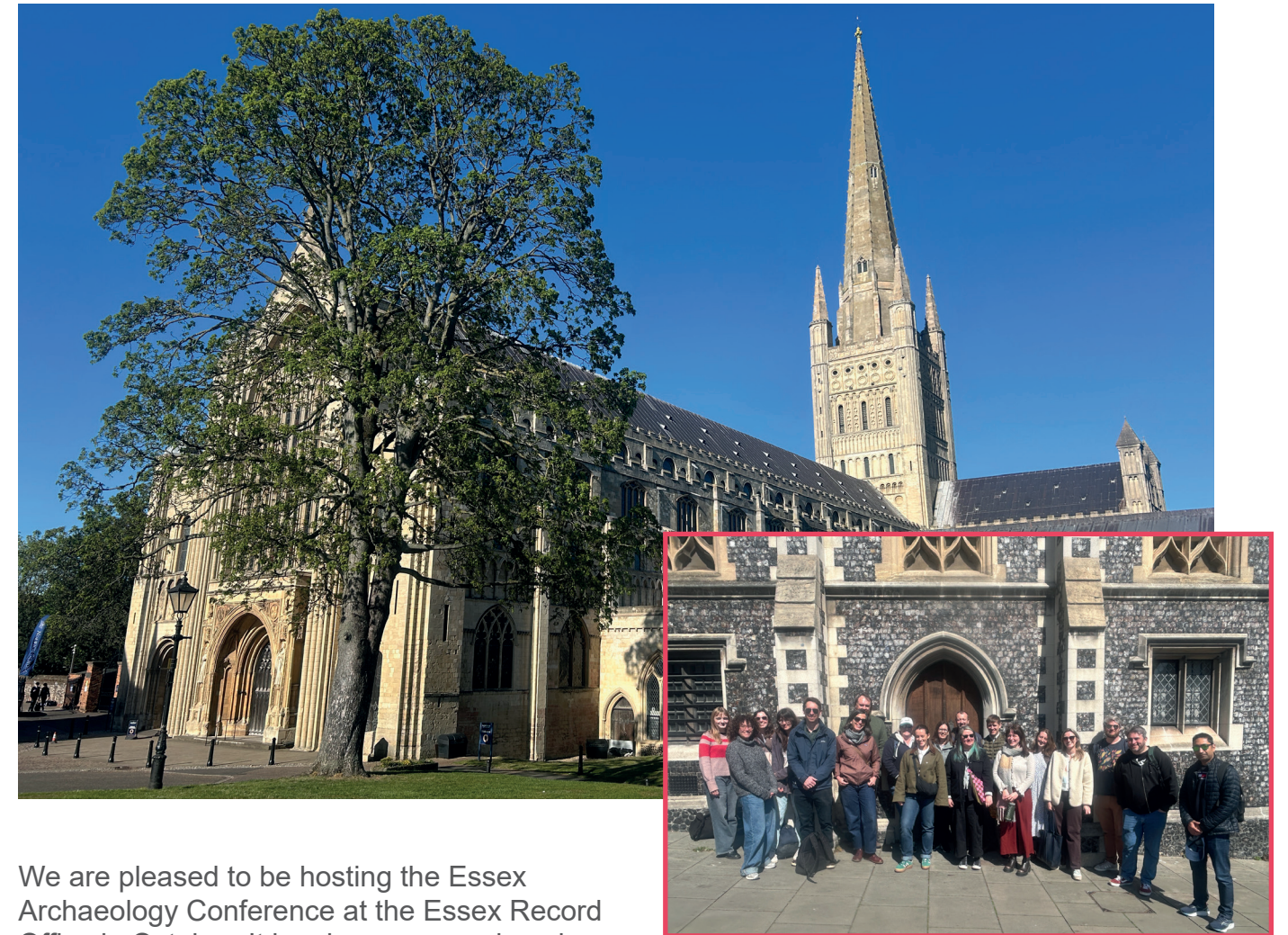
Thank you for taking the time to read our second 'Year in Review', which outlines some of the great work the Historic Environment Team has accomplished over the past 12 months.

This year we have supported new client local planning authorities across the east and south-east, undertaken extensive project work supporting local plans, and prepared excavations and conferences for 2026. This is a busy period to review and an exciting year ahead to anticipate.

One of the year's highlights was the success of the first Festival of Essex Archaeology and Heritage. This was a great accomplishment for the team who worked together to deliver a free event for over 1,100 of the public in attendance. A huge effort was made by all exhibitors and those giving talks to make this a special day, and it could not have been delivered without the collective involvement of all. It was very a positive experience to see some of the best of the county's heritage and archaeology showcased and also the level of enthusiasm

from the public. We are repeating the festival this year, and like all great sequels, we are aiming for bigger and better! We have lots of talks, exhibitors and many additional family activities this year. To find out more about the free day, please visit the [Explore Essex website](#).

We have had some fantastic away days as a team this year. Our first team away day was to Knole House, where we were hosted by the National Trust. As a result of this visit, we have now completed our first Buildings Archaeology Course in our education syllabus, which took place at Knole in May this year. Other team outings included a trip to Norwich, where the team undertook an exploratory challenge of the heritage assets in the city. My personal favourite team outing of the year was to West Stow, where we had the perfect mix of presentations about experimental archaeology and a talk about Tolkien and his use of archaeology in literature. We are looking forward to doing more team building challenges and outings over the next year.



We are pleased to be hosting the Essex Archaeology Conference at the Essex Record Office in October. It has been over a decade since the last conference, so there will be lots of new discoveries and research to hear about. More information can be found [on our website](#).

We were successful in the procurement of Countryside Stewardship funding for the excavation at Mersea Blockhouse in Cudmore Grove Country Park. We have appointed Colchester Archaeological Trust to run a community excavation, with Operation Nightingale in support, over the summer of 2026. It will be fantastic to see the results of this excavation, especially before the scheduled Henrician fortification is lost to the sea..... I will be getting a trowel out myself for the first time in over a decade!

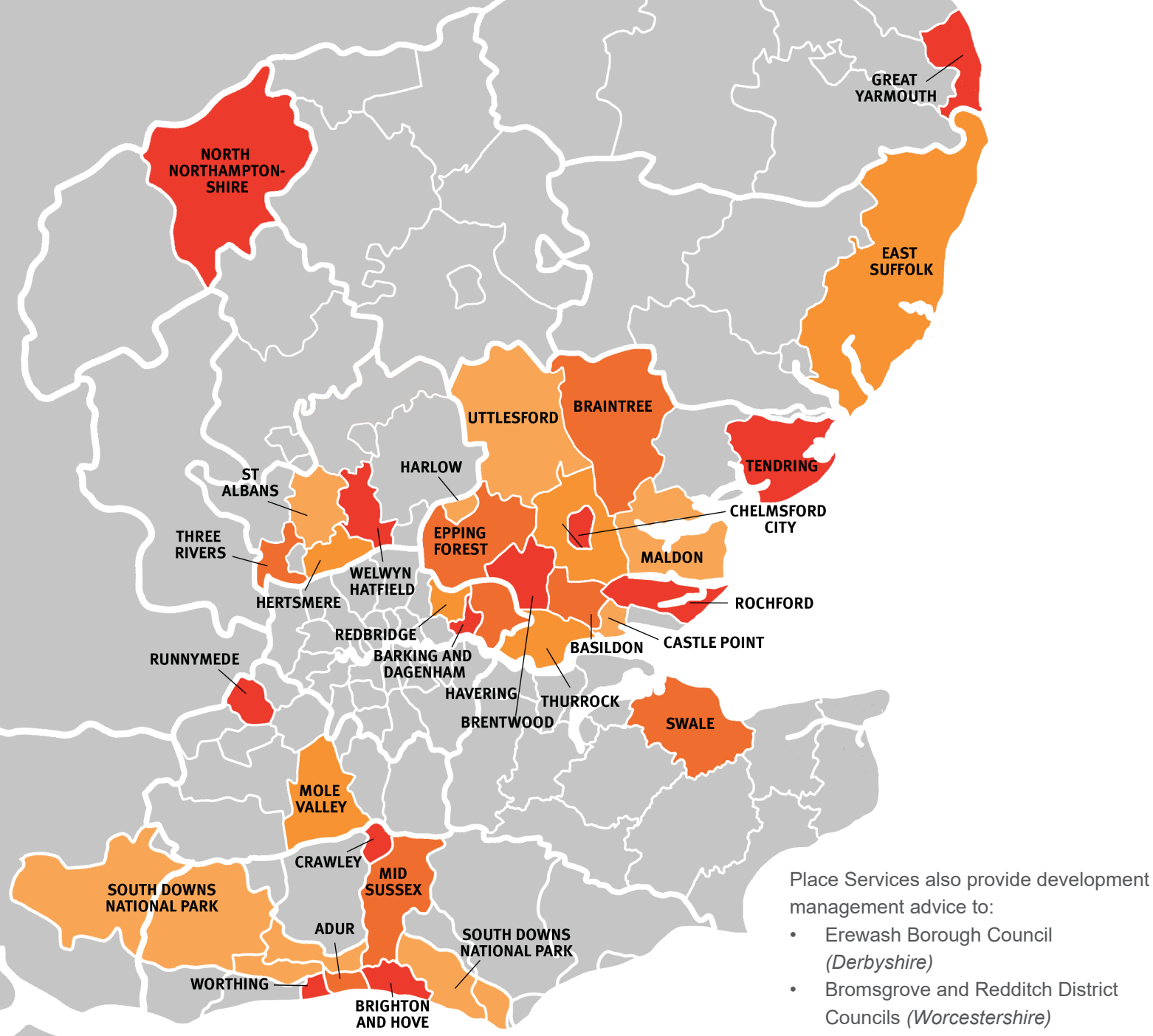
I am particularly proud that the team on the Essex HER enhancement project are about to launch the 'Essex Heritage Hub'. For the first time ever, a comprehensive version of the Essex Historic Environment Record will be available online, which will be a great resource to researchers and the public.

The service our team provides has continued to grow, with conservation advice expanding to Great Yarmouth and Brighton & Hove, and archaeological advice to new areas in Sussex and Hampshire. Over the coming months we have more people joining the team, and I look forward to the diversity of experience this will bring as we continue to grow and evolve.

**Tim Murphy**  
Historic Environment Manager







## SLAs: Coastal locations and a National Park

This year the team have continued to deliver our core work of providing archaeological and built heritage development management advice to local planning authorities. Over the course of 2024-2025, Place Services invested in new bespoke case management software, and this will be the first full year it has been in use. The software provides increased efficiency and reporting; in next year's review there will be loads of interesting stats to show!

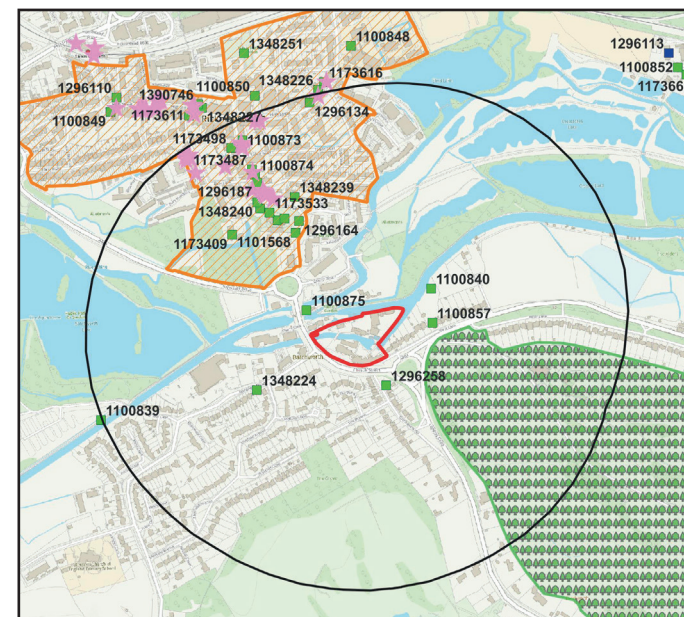
We have been supporting some new clients this year and, for built heritage, there has been a focus on coastal locations. In early 2026 we began providing Conservation Officer support to Great Yarmouth Borough Council and Brighton & Hove

City Council. We have also continued to provide Conservation Officer support to East Suffolk Council, with our officers now involved in the development management of districts of a large proportion of East Anglia's coastline.

We were thrilled to be successful in our tender to provide archaeological advice to South Downs National Park Authority. Over the next three years our team will be acting as development management archaeologists, advising the National Park Authority.

The team have also been providing support for a number of NSIPs, including Norwich-Tilbury and the Lower Thames Crossing.

## Local Plans



Our team have completed a number of Heritage Impact Assessments this year to support local plans. It is important that local planning authorities have a robust evidence base to support their plan, and the completion of heritage assessments relating to housing and employment allocation sites is a part of this.

Over the past few years, Place Services have developed an efficient and cost-effective approach to assess proposed allocation sites. This begins with a sift of all relevant sites to determine the level of detailed assessment required (if any). This assessment then proceeds as either a high-level proforma or a detailed report for each individual site.

Over the past 12 months we have assisted six local planning authorities by producing Heritage Impact Assessments for their local plan sites. These have typically included consideration of both archaeology and built heritage. In addition, we have also assisted with appropriate policy wording.

## Appeals

Place Services have continued to provide Expert Witness services to Local Planning Authorities to support appeals. We have had high levels of success in defending our position relating to heritage.

Over the past year we have supported the following local planning authorities in appeal hearings and inquiries:

- Babergh & Mid Suffolk District Councils;
- Braintree District Council;
- Chelmsford City Council; and
- Uttlesford District Council.

The image below is of the Grade II\* listed Church of St John, Elmswell (Appeal reference APP/W3520/W/25/3364061). As identified in our assessments, the inspector found that the proposed development would cause harm to the heritage asset, as well as the quality of wide-reaching countryside views as assessed by our Landscape team.





# Conservation Area Appraisals

In 2025-26 we continued to work closely with our Local Authority clients to prepare Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans. Here are some of the key highlights of the year.

This year we worked with Uttlesford District Council and local parish councils to prepare Appraisals and Management Plans for Stebbing Green, Debden Green, Pledgdon Green, and Shortgrove. Our team have been helping to take these through the consultation process.

We have also assisted Braintree District Council with the preparation of CAAMPs for Halstead and Castle Hedingham.

We have been delighted to return to work with East Suffolk Council to draft the Somerleyton and Wangford Conservation Area appraisals, both of which are expected to go to public consultation later this year.



## Climate Change and the Historic Environment

In 2024-25, Place Services updated the Essex Design Guide's [Climate Change and the Historic Environment](#) module. This contains information about the opportunities and constraints when working to retrofit and reduce the carbon footprint of heritage assets. We were later commissioned to provide advice documents specific to districts such as Test Valley, advising on measures that can be taken to make historic buildings more energy efficient. This guidance is available to view [on the Test Valley Borough Council website](#).

In 2026 our focus has been on archaeology and climate change. The team have been finalising our Solar Farms and Archaeology Guidance. This will be published in July 2026 and is aimed to provide applicants advice on solar farm development and specifically how to address archaeology. The guidance sets out the approach to the assessment of planning applications and explains the purpose of the additional surveys we may request to better understand a site's archaeological potential.

Our largest body of work this year has been in Greater London, where we are working with Lewisham Council on a full borough-wide review and re-appraisal of 14 Conservation Areas. These range from rows of ornate Victorian villas to sweeping historic parks. The appraisals have undergone stakeholder review and will be taken to public consultation soon.

Further afield, we've recently drafted appraisals for the Winslow and Buckinghamshire Conservation Areas, and have begun work on the Beaconsfield Old Town Conservation Area, also in Buckinghamshire.







# Supporting ECC Heritage Assets

We have been working hard at Cressing Temple Barns and have secured Scheduled Monument Consent for the reroofing of the Wheat and Barley Barns. ECC is now going through the process of procuring a specialist contractor.

We have also continued to support ECC Highways in maintaining some of the county's historic and listed bridges which need to function as part of the road network.



One of the more unusual projects of the year was support to our County Parks. A void was revealed in the ground at Cudmore Grove Country Park on Mersea Island; this was thought to have possibly been associated with the nearby World War Two coastal battery. Through research and geo-physical survey (for which we are grateful to Colchester Archaeological Group), it was revealed that this void had been an underground headquarters bunker to the coastal battery. This was an interesting find and furthers the discussion of the chronology of coastal defences here; the WW2 battery only being a few hundred meters from the blockhouse we will be excavating over the summer.



## Mersea Blockhouse: Key Facts

- Built in 1543 to protect the country from a potential invasion from Europe.
- Was controlled by the Parliamentarians in the 1640s when they besieged Colchester during the English Civil War.
- It was reused numerous times over the years, including as a court where fishermen were tried for dredging oysters out of season.
- A 16th-century plan of the fort shows a seven-sided enclosure, but later mapping and archaeological fieldwork indicates that it was triangular in shape.
- Coastal erosion has resulted in the inundation of the site and damage to the archaeological earthworks.

## Cudmore Grove Excavation

After the success of our excavation at Weald Country Park in 2024, we were keen to secure further funding for some of our at-risk monuments in the wider ECC property portfolio.

For summer 2026 we have organised an excavation in partnership with Historic England. Colchester Archaeological Trust will excavate the area of the Tudor Blockhouse at Cudmore Grove Country Park on Mersea Island. This will create a permanent record of the site before it is lost to coastal erosion.

The project is grant funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, supported by Historic England, through the Countryside Stewardship Heritage Service.

The Tudor Blockhouse, a Scheduled Monument, was built in 1543 as part of a coastal military defence programme under Henry

VIII to defend the mouth of the Colne estuary. The blockhouse is the only example in Essex with upstanding earthworks. Instead of the typical stone structure, the defences were constructed of 'earth and board'.

Commencing on 29 June for five weeks, volunteers will excavate the site to better understand the extent of the fortification and the defensive strategies of the blockhouses under Henry VIII's reign. During the five-week excavation, volunteers from the local community are invited to participate in the dig, along with members of Operation Nightingale, which supports the recovery and rehabilitation of military veterans and serving personnel. Visitors to the park will also have the opportunity to observe the live excavation.

We look forward to seeing the results!





# Public Engagement

## The Festival of Essex Archaeology & Heritage 2026

On Thursday 24th July 2025, we held the inaugural Festival of Essex Archaeology and Heritage at Cressing Temple. Over 30 different organisations were represented at the event, including local museums, archaeological contractors, community heritage societies, historical reenactment groups, and ECC heritage and leisure services.

There were plenty of activities for people to get involved in throughout the day, from tours of the medieval barns to artefact handling, meeting bats to live demonstrations of the Essex Historic Environment Record. There were also two storytelling workshops for children. Sixteen talks were delivered on topics in the conference rooms such as Essex's industrial heritage, the 2024 community excavation at Weald Country Park, the London Shipwreck exhibition in Southend Museum, and the discovery of the Fenwick Hoard in Colchester.

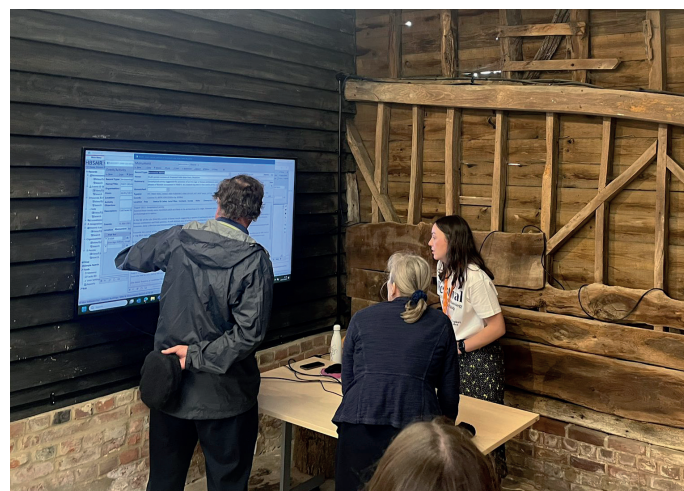
**“The variety of stands was outstanding and all groups were enthusiastic about their area of interest.”**

Visitor feedback from the 2025 festival

All of our Historic Environment team members contributed by managing setup from the early hours of the morning, welcoming guests at the front desk, and overseeing the activities at our stands in the barn with indefatigable enthusiasm. We are also grateful to our partners at Explore Essex and the team at Cressing Temple Barns for their support with the event management and marketing.

Despite unfortunate weather on the day, over 1100 people came along to learn more about their local archaeology and heritage, making the first festival a huge success. Attendees and exhibitors alike mentioned how pleased they were to have an event celebrating the rich heritage of Essex and the opportunity to learn more about where they live. The response to the day has reaffirmed the value of archaeology and heritage, and the importance of sharing this knowledge and inspiring future generations.

We're pleased to confirm that the festival will be returning on Thursday 23rd July 2026. There'll be even more exhibitors than last year, as well as falconry displays and a Punch & Judy show! Our programme of talks scheduled throughout the day includes presentations on excavations in Essex, deep dives into local history and events, and peeks behind the scenes with heritage organisations. We're looking forward to seeing you all there!



**“All the experts in one place! Lots of information, opportunity to network, lovely atmosphere.”** Visitor feedback from the 2025 festival



## Essex Archaeology Conference: Recent Research & Discoveries in Essex

On 3rd October 2026, Place Services will be hosting the upcoming Essex Archaeology Conference at the Essex Record Office. We are working in partnership with The Essex Society for Archaeology and History, who will be funding the publication of the conference.

First held in 1978, these conferences convened by Essex County Council have served to summarise archaeological work taking place in the county and provide timely reviews of current archaeological knowledge. Since the last conference in 2008, responsibility for the management of the historic environment of Essex has changed with the creation of Place Services in 2012 to provide archaeological advisory services and maintenance of the Essex Historic Environment Record. This coincided with the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework.

There has since been a significant amount of archaeological fieldwork undertaken in Essex, and

this day conference is an opportunity for individuals and organisations to provide an update on the latest historic environment research and discoveries in our county.

Throughout the day there will be 14 presentations delivered by heritage professionals, academics, community groups, independent researchers and students who have undertaken research into the historic environment of Essex. Presentations will explore recent archaeological work in Essex, including new discoveries, the latest techniques and technology, community archaeology initiatives and public engagement.

There will also be stands of various archaeological organisations available for perusal during the breaks.

To view the programme and book your place to join us on the day, [please visit our website](#).



# Traditional Building Skills and Conservation Courses

Thank you to everyone who attended our Traditional Building Skills and Conservation Courses in 2025-26.

Our courses began in 1997, when ECC Conservation Officer Anne Holden established a series of practical courses to introduce construction workers to traditional building materials and methods. This was a result of an urgent need to address the shortage of traditional skills, an issue which is still relevant today.

The first course she organised was a hands-on joinery course, where people could learn how to repair old doors and window frames. This was followed by a conservation brickwork course, and then topics such as lime plastering and timber framing were added to the syllabus. The programme was run alongside craft days that the Council held over the summer. These included lectures and practical demonstrations, and were designed for conservation professionals such as architects, planners and surveyors.

Following their initial success, committee approval was secured for more course funding, and a disused barn at Cressing Temple was converted into a heated workshop. Old school woodworking benches were set up in the barn, together with portable woodworking machinery, to create a centre for education.

In 1999, a full-time Historic Buildings Education Officer, Pauline Turner, was employed. Under Pauline's direction, new courses were added to the



syllabus. These ranged from long-straw thatching to repairing stone tombs in churchyards. A programme of one-day summer seminars was set up, and courses for children gave young students the chance to daub plaster on to wattle during term time.

Eight years after Anne had initiated the courses at Cressing Temple Barns, the shortage of traditional skills was recognised as a national issue.

Anne wrote a short piece for IHBC Context in 2001, acknowledging how few young people were choosing to join the construction industry after school. As a result, the team decided to run day schools in traditional buildings alongside their usual syllabus. The day schools were held at Cressing, covering carpentry, brickwork, and wattle and daub.

Since 2012, the courses have been managed by Place Services. We keep a syllabus of hands-on practical courses and lectures available to professionals in construction, homeowners, and conservation professionals. The syllabus has also expanded in recent years to cover historic

building surveying techniques and heritage planning, responding to requests from attendees and CPD needs in the sector. We continue to work from our base at Cressing

Temple Barns, as well as host practical courses at live sites.

Over the years, conservation training has evolved significantly. Accreditation and CPD has become increasingly important for professionals working with historic buildings. Our courses continue to grow from the early educational initiatives that ECC's historic buildings team had the foresight to establish.

We have continued to provide a mixture of archaeological and building conservation-based courses, led by knowledgeable and engaging instructors. Our tutors deliver high-quality IHBC-certified training for professionals, homeowners, and anyone interested in developing their knowledge and skills.

Some of this year's courses have included a visit to a traditional carpentry workshop to see ongoing repair work to a fifteenth century chapel roof, an introduction to geoarchaeology and a breakdown of the public inquiry process for historic environment professionals.

In addition, we have been able to offer a new bursary scheme this year, funded by the Templar Heritage Trust. The purpose of the bursary has been to provide grants for training in the crafts of historic building restoration or conservation, primarily for the benefit of young, unemployed, or

disadvantaged persons or persons who would not otherwise be able to afford such training. We are pleased to confirm that the bursary scheme will continue for 2026-27. If a bursary could help you to attend one of our courses, [please visit our website to find out how to apply.](#)

Courses planned for this year include *Paint Finishes: Understanding and Conserving Buildings and Their Interiors* and the return of *Archaeological Desk-Based Assessments*. We were especially excited to be partnering with the National Trust to offer a practical, three-day course in archaeological building recording at Knole House. Attendees worked together in a stunning setting to create a stone-by-stone record of the late-medieval garden wall.

For all the latest news about our courses, please email us at [conservation.courses@essex.gov.uk](mailto:conservation.courses@essex.gov.uk) to join our mailing list.



A year in numbers...

730

equivalent hours of CPD delivered

164

total attendees

100%

of survey respondents would recommend our courses

**“This was an absolutely brilliant course delivered with expert knowledge and total enthusiasm. Would highly recommend!”**

2026 course feedback





# Investment in the Historic Environment

Last year we told you about our two-year project to enhance the Essex HER and radically improve public access to heritage information. As the work enters its final phases, Project Manager Alice Cattermole provides an update about the progress so far.

Work on the Essex Historic Environment Record (HER) this year has focused on the enhancement of our legacy datasets, the integration of new information from the National Record of the Historic Environment (NRHE) and the development of a new online Essex Heritage Hub which is due to go live this summer.

The project team has created over 1,600 new monument records, 2,200 new event records, 1,240 new source records and 1,380 new find records this year. In addition, they have enhanced a further 35,600 existing records in the HER database. This represents a huge achievement, and increases our record totals for monuments by 5%, for events by 21%, for sources by 4% and for finds by 4%. All of the records worked on by the team are now fully compliant with current data standards.

The vast majority of information that has been added to the Essex HER over the last year has been information from the National Record of the Historic Environment. To date, the project team has now accessioned over 8,800 records from the NRHE. This has resulted in the addition of

1,136 new monument records for sites and finds that were not previously recorded on the Essex HER and 700 fieldwork events that were not previously recorded. A further 5,000 monument records and 1,900 event records were modified to incorporate new information from the NRHE. As the HER database is a live system, all of these new and amended records are already being used to inform development management in Essex and being provided to anyone requesting HER data.

We will shortly be launching the Essex Heritage Hub, which will provide online access to the new and enhanced HER records, alongside a wide range of other resources and links. This website is aimed at anyone interested in finding out more about Essex's past and includes simple and advanced search options, detailed records and interactive maps, alongside thematic content and information about forthcoming events and training. The Essex Heritage Hub provides full online access to the Essex HER for the first time and is a resource that will continue to grow and develop as new data and resources are added.

## Education

In addition to our syllabus of courses, we have been providing tailored training to a number of organisations over the year.

We hosted students from the University of Tennessee, providing lectures about climate change and the historic environment, specifically retrofit to historic buildings. We also hosted a day course in London for Purdue University, Indiana. This day included a walk through Southwark looking at case studies of 'restoration', 'preservation' and 'conservation'. This was followed by a tour of Battersea Power Station by Conservation Architect David Hills from Roger Mears Architects.

Over the course of the past year, Place Services have been offering lectures to post-graduate conservation courses, providing talks about understanding heritage significance and how

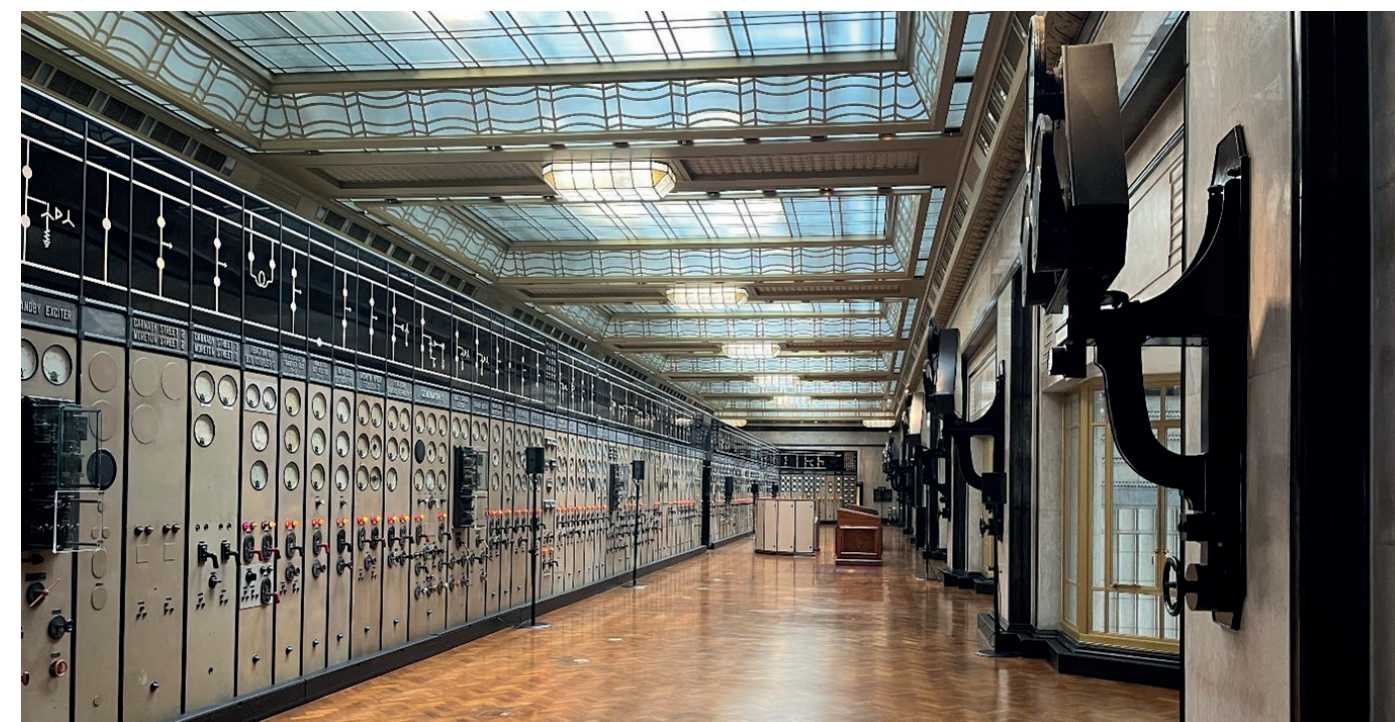
this is applied in the planning process, as well as informing managed changed to heritage assets. We have provided lectures to Oxford Brookes and Portsmouth University so far, with more booked to come.

We have continued to provide training to our local authority clients on request and as part of projects. This has included the delivery of conservation area training to officers in Lewisham, and historic buildings training in Dacorum in conjunction with our Urban Design team. We have also recently provided officer training to Brighton & Hove Council.

In 2026 we will be assisting Breckland Council to deliver heritage courses to the public and professionals. The first will be an introduction to researching house history and navigating the planning process as a listed building owner.



We were very pleased to be invited by the Planning Inspectorate to provide a talk about archaeology. Mark Baister and Tim Murphy attended Woodbridge to provide talks to a number of planning inspectors, and discuss how archaeology is considered in the context of the National Planning Policy Framework and the planning process.





# Projects

## St Mary's, East Bergholt

In May 2025 we were awarded the tender to prepare a Conservation Statement as part of The National Lottery Heritage Fund project *Securing the Future of St Mary the Virgin, East Bergholt*. The project seeks to re-cover the lead roofs of the Grade I listed church and carry out associated timber repairs, replace the pews with chairs to provide greater flexibility of use by the congregation and the local community, and provide level access by raising the floor. The project will also provide new interpretation and external signage to better tell the story of the church and its place in the village, which was home to the internationally renowned artist John Constable. The aim is to increase visitor numbers and dwell times as well as better support community engagement.

St Mary's is in the Perpendicular style, with phases of historic fabric dating to the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and additions and alterations



in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is notable for its partially complete west tower, which was commenced in the early sixteenth century but never completed and now has the character of a ruin. The church is also known for its distinctive sixteenth-century Grade II\* listed freestanding bell cage located in the churchyard, housing a ring of five bells. The bells are rung manually by using their headstocks rather than bell ropes.

The churchyard is also home to four Grade II listed tombs, and is the final resting place of John Constable's parents and his wife Maria's grandparents. The church interior features a fifteenth-century wall painting, which was part of an Easter Sepulchre, and numerous historic monuments and memorials to former residents of East Bergholt, as well as good quality stained glass windows dating to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Place Services are pleased to be involved in the next step of the journey at Coalhouse Fort.

After Place Services successfully managed a feasibility study, Thurrock Council were able to secure funding for the next stage of works. We will now be supporting the architect to secure Scheduled Monument Consent for new schemes at the site. We will also assist the volunteer co-ordinator to deliver management plans and training of volunteers, which will enable them to undertake works in the fort.

PLACE SERVICES

CBA FESTIVAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY 2026

FREE

**THE**  
**Festival**  
of Essex Archaeology  
& Heritage

**Thursday**  
**23 JULY**  
10.00am to 5.00pm

History,  
archaeology  
and family fun  
at Cressing  
Temple Barns

Essex County Council

CRESSING TEMPLE BARNS

[explore-essex.com/events](https://explore-essex.com/events)



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