

Braintree District Museum explores life on the Essex Homefront

Braintree District Museum invited local representatives and Friends of the Museum to join them on the evening of Friday 3 July as they opened their summer exhibition, World War II: The People's Story. The exhibition is the culmination of a fascinating 6 month oral history project conducted by the Museum's Collections Manager, Claire Willetts. The project aimed to commemorate the 70th anniversary of VE day which took place earlier this year by highlighting the story of War in our county and its enduring legacy.

The opening night was a great success as visitors remarked upon the vividness and realism the testimonies and memories gathered by Claire brought to the exhibition. As Mr John Baugh, Director of Braintree District Museum Trust, noted 'it has been a brilliant project. The audio histories made the exhibition extremely personal, bringing the story of War in Essex to life in a new way. Everyone who remembers the War has their own tales to tell and it is great that the Museum can preserve this resource for future generations.' The testimonies will eventually be added to the Museum's website so that everyone can access them. Claire Willetts thanked those who had shared their memories with her, saying that she felt 'very privileged' to hear their stories.

The exhibition was officially opened by local military historian Mr Dennis Buston. As Dennis observed, 'it is important for younger generations to understand their history. It explains the story of who we are and how we got to where we are today.'

In addition to the many local memories recorded, the Museum was also fortunate enough to receive several artefact donations for the exhibition display. One such object was a wartime wedding dress made out of parachute silk. The dress epitomized how resourceful those living through war needed to be, but also one of the positive tales from the period which can sometimes be overlooked. The wedding dress was worn in 1945 by Joan 'Freda' King, originally of Wethersfield. Joan met her sweetheart Tom, an Australian airman stationed in Essex, at the Wethersfield dance in late 1944. During the war years Freda worked at Courtaulds testing the suitability of parachute material; it was from here that she sourced some rejected silk in order to make her dress. Freda and Tom returned to Australia after the war where they lived out a happy life with their three children.

The Museum would like to thank the many contributors to the exhibition, in particular those who kindly shared their memories with us. The exhibition will now be open to the public until 12 September during normal Museum opening hours.

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Braintree District Museum



Left to right: Jean Wells, Marie Swann and Ann Gill admire Freda King's parachute silk wedding dress shown on the far right. Photograph: **Braintree District Museum**



Left to right: Local historian Mr Dennis Buston of Stisted, Essex and Mr John Baugh, Director of Braintree District Museum Trust open the exhibition. Photograph: **Braintree District Museum**



Visitors admire the artefacts on display and listen to the audio testimonies of wartime life in Essex.
Photograph: **Braintree District Museum**