

Exploring HERITAGE OPEN DAYS in Essex

Laura Davey highlights some of the top Essex attractions as the county's unique history is put on show as part of the Heritage Open Days festival this month

In the heart of the Colne Valley, there is one man who takes stamp collecting to a whole new level. With thousands of posters, uniforms, bicycles and other postal ephemera, Steve Knight has been collecting Post Office memorabilia for decades. Across the years, he's accumulated more than 130 post boxes, telephone kiosks and stamp machines, all housed in his suburban backyard, complete with garden sheds branded with Post Office signage. This extraordinary collection is not usually accessible to the public, but it will open its doors for just one day in September.

The Colne Valley Postal History Museum is just one of dozens of venues opening their normally locked doors as part of the annual Heritage Open Days festival this month.

Heritage Open Days is funded by the National Trust and players of People's Postcode Lottery, and

this year, for the first time in the festival's 24-year history, it's been extended across two weekends. The festival offers both local people and visitors the chance to discover secret histories on their doorstep, some exclusively open



Photograph: Steve Knight

ABOVE:
Pleshey Castle's
15th century
brick bridge

LEFT:
The Colne Valley
Postal History
Museum

to visitors on Heritage Open Days. Here's a taste of what's to come.

DISCOVER HIDDEN PLACES

While hikers around the Chelmsford area may have admired the brick bridge on the hill from a distance, a special Heritage Open Days tour of the site will let visitors uncover the full story of Pleshey Castle. A teasing fact to begin with, the bridge's 15th century credentials actually make it one of the earliest brick structures in the country. Led by a local expert, the history of the castle will be

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revealed in a story involving William the Conqueror, the Magna Carta, Shakespeare

and, intriguingly, even Dick Whittington.

Another property opening specially for the festival is the 12th century St Giles Loper Hospital Remains in Maldon. As the sole survivor of only 10 Medieval hospitals ever built in the county, this historically significant site will be opening to the public for guided tours about its medical past.

HAVE FUN WITH THE FAMILY

Heritage Open Days offers plenty of fun (and free), family-friendly events, like the Palace Theatre

Photograph courtesy of Chelmsford Museum Service





Photograph courtesy of The Landmark Trust

ABOVE:
Peake's House

Open Day in Westcliff on Sea. Budding actors and actresses will get the chance to tread the boards in a behind the scenes tour of this Art Nouveau theatre, and watch the tech crew in action to learn what goes on backstage.

The Museum of Power in Langford is another great choice for families, with plenty of room to play and picnic in the grounds, and collections covering everything mechanical, from steam engines to eco cars. Another scenic picnic spot, the Harlow Museum and Walled Gardens, retains the formal

landscaping of the 17th century manor house which once stood in the grounds. With craft activities, curator-led tours and 'handling history' sessions, this event is ideal for children of all ages.

CELEBRATE EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN

Marking 100 years since the Representation of the People Act first gave some British women the vote, this year's festival theme is Extraordinary Women. From all walks of life, notable women of Essex will be honoured at many

events, including Ellen Willmott. A formidable character and keen gardener, she was one of only a handful of women to be awarded a medal by the Royal Horticultural Society during the Victorian age. Once the site of her

"Now an office block, the factory was originally the first of its kind in the world"

spectacular formal gardens in Brentwood, visitors on a guided tour about Warley Place Nature Reserve will now have an answer for why there are remains of stables and greenhouses in their favourite wildlife park.

In another Extraordinary Women event, a lecture by historian, Dr Viv Newman of Anglia Ruskin University, will focus on the contribution of women to World War I, and during the lead up to the suffrage act. Doing their Bit: Women's Suffrage Movements and the Great War will tell the true story of courageous women working in a field hospital. The talk will also explore the controversial view that the suffragist society, the NUWSS, was less concerned with



Photograph courtesy of the Chelmsford Civic Society

LEFT:
Marconi Company Factory



Photograph courtesy of Harlow Museum

A special extra treat!

All events taking part in Heritage Open Days have to have free entry, so many venues and museums drop their charges just for dates of the festival! Here are some top money-saving options.

The Gibberd Garden, Harlow

An eccentric garden filled with sculptures, ceramic pots and architectural salvage.

Braintree Museum, Braintree

Galleries documenting the history of the town from the prehistoric to the 21st century, with a particular focus on natural history.

Stow Maries Great War Aerodrome, Chelmsford

A uniquely preserved former World War I airfield, complete with hanger, squadron office and a fascinating collection of aviation artefacts.

Maldon District Museum, Maldon

Eclectic collections on the social, domestic and industrial history of the town, with interactive games and quizzes.

Please contact each venue for details of opening before travelling

TOP:
Harlow Museum and Walled Gardens

ABOVE:
Eco cars at the Museum of Power

LEFT:
Southend's Palace Theatre will host an Open Day as part of the festival

women's safety and more with creating newspaper headlines to further their cause.

DISCOVER THE COUNTY'S INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

The Marconi History Walking Tour around Chelmsford and the company's former wireless factory offers an insight into the importance of wartime communications. Under the advertising slogan 'Free Training. Good Pay. Permanent Positions', the Marconi Company ran a vital training programme for wireless operators during World War I. Now an office block, the factory was originally the first of its kind in the world, and is often considered the birthplace of radio.

A pre-industrial factory, of sorts, will also be open in Colchester's historic Ditch Quarter. Originally a row of homes to



Photograph from Museum of Power

weavers working in the cloth trade, and later integrated for a wealthy merchant, Peake's House encapsulates the story of the town's prosperous Elizabethan era.

From the past to the present, a behind-the-scenes tour of the Marriage's Flour Mill will show the continued manufacturing heritage of the area. Operational on the same site in Chelmsford for more than 100 years, a behind the scenes look at the Victorian mill building and modern facilities will demonstrate the active workings of the factory. ♦

Taking place between September 6 to 9 and 13 to 16, Heritage Open Days 2018 is set to be bigger and better than ever before! Every event is free, so there's no reason not to get out your diary and start planning a full calendar of activities. Further details of the events mentioned, as well as full regional and national listings, can be found at www.heritageopendays.org.uk.



Photograph from Southend Theatres