

Pageant frozen in time... thaws out to go on display

Conservation of a rare 1909 Pageant Shrine

Colchester Castle

A rare Pageant Shrine which was used as a prop in an open-air performance in Castle Park in June 1909 is thawing out from a deep freeze as conservationists at Colchester and Ipswich Museums have been working hard to get the prop ready to go on display at Colchester Castle.

Emma Hogarth, Conservator at Colchester and Ipswich Museums said, "The pageant prop is in very good condition considering it is 100 years old (now we've stuck some bits back on). To make sure it was safe to be stored with our other objects it has been deep frozen to guarantee it did not have any wood worm. The colour is now much brighter as it has been thoroughly cleaned using various conservation methods and because of this we have also discovered that the panels are made of metal foil rather than dark paper as originally thought. Once on display it will be in a climate controlled case and will be available for the people of Colchester to see."

The prop is a wooden shrine built to hold the relics of St Helena and was used in Episode 4 of the Pageant. Ernest Mason, father of Bernard Mason*, led the prop-building committee and he personally made this shrine. In a nice bit of symmetry, he played the character (Walter) that made it in the pageant storyline. The prop also features a miniature of Ernest's only daughter, Helena (named after the patron saint of Colchester).

The Pageant was an open-air performance in Castle Park that took place over a week in June in 1909. It consisted of several episodes; each recounted a different period of Colchester's history. It started in the Roman period and stretched right through until the Siege of Colchester in 1648. As a result, because of the scale of the history being covered, thousands of local residents were brought in to act in many of the scenes.

With so many people taking part in the pageant, hundreds of costumes had to be made. Many people were involved through providing materials and time to create the props, set and costumes necessary to bring the pageant to life. Hollytrees House (now Hollytrees museum) became the headquarters for all pageant-related activity and many of the props and costumes were made there. In our collection, we have tickets, programmes, scripts and photographs relating to the pageant. The pageant prop that we have can be seen in one of the photos and it is great to have an object that links to other parts of the collection.

Unfortunately very few of the costumes or props seem to have survived. When the pageant was over, everything (even the office supplies, typewriters and the director's megaphone) were sold at an auction and there's no way to trace where everything went. This is why it's so exciting that a prop from the pageant has resurfaced.

Now the conservation process has been completed it will be going on display at Colchester Castle for everyone to see and enjoy at the new upcoming exhibition 'A Few of my Favourite Things' which opens on 19th February.

Catherine Newley, Assistant Curator of Community History at Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service said "This is a great opportunity to put this rare object on show and we have photographs of the shrine in the performance and it is lovely to preserve it for the future."

Contact Laura Hardisty, Assistant Marketing Officer, Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service 01206 282938.

* Bernard Mason, (12 September 1895 – 29 April 1981) became a prominent Colchester businessman and philanthropist who was born in Ipswich but lived his whole life in Colchester. He was the proprietor of Mason's printing firm from which he retired as director in 1962. Bernard Mason became interested in clock by Colchester makers and over the years his collection grew and with it the story of these craftsmen.

Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service

Our vision is to create a museum service that is a source of pride, inspiration and fun.

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