DodoLab Presents: The Thetford Travelling Menagerie

A project by Lisa Hirmer and Andrew Hunter, as DodoLab

Commissioned by Deborah Smith as part of Thetford Art Projects and funded by Breckland Partnership.

In Collaboration with The Town of Thetford, Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life, The Thetford Library and Ancient House Museum Knit & Knatter

DodoLab is a project of the University of Waterloo School of Architecture funded by Musagetes.

Special Thanks to Barry Wall, Susan Glossop, Oliver Bone, David Nichols, Sue Ketchell, Melissa Hawker, Sam Dawson, Mark Fretwell, Charles Howden

Thetford | March 2011

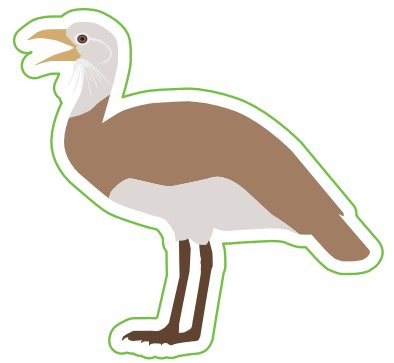
the Breckland Partnership
working together for a brighter future

WATERLOO ARCHITECTURE

musagetes

Otis Tarda, is the world's heaviest flying animal. Once abundant in Britain, it was hunted to extinction locally by the 1840s, but still survives (in declining numbers) in parts of Europe, Russia, China and the Middle East. At Ancient House Museum, you can see a lovely oil painting of the bird and a stuffed specimen in a glass case below the remains of a Golden Eagle. At the museum in Norwich Castle, you can see a large group of bustards displayed in a natural arrangement, in a big room filled with taxidermy specimens. In a dark case down the hall from the bustards you will find the regal remains of the Great Auk. Once one of the largest aquatic birds, it disappeared around the same time as the Great Bustard in Britain.

Very recently, bustards from Russia have been reintroduced to Britain on Salisbury Plain. While these Russian birds are the same as the regionally extinct British bird, they are considered "alien" by English law. While suitable natural habitat will be key to the successful return of the Great Bustard, another recent addition to the landscape puts them at risk. Hydro towers and power lines pose a significant hazard to this low flyer. What from Thetford's past could, should, or has been, brought back? What are the risks and what has changed that may impede such an effort?



THE GREAT BUSTARD

In the display cases of Ancient House Museum, you can see the giant molars and great ridged teeth of the mastodon, a once mighty creature that roamed this landscape. These giant wooly elephants were abundant in many parts of the world, including around the Great Lakes in Canada where DodoLab is based. The remains in Ancient House Museum were found locally and they are a potent reminder that a very different climate and environment once defined this area. Mastodons are known as "mega fauna," giant extinct creatures related to many surviving mammals. There were once massive ground sloths, huge bears and beavers. Sadly, the populations of their descendants are also now in decline and Britain lost its diversity of big mammals (bears and wolves for example) centuries ago – lingering on only in museums, folktales and children's stories. Some have returned for brief visits in zoos, circuses and menageries.

Such weighty reminders of the past linger on in many forms. Walking the streets around the core of Thetford, we witnessed the red brick remains of an old hospital and an Odd Fellows Hall. And we wondered, what are some of the other physical traces of the past that have come to rest here? What buildings and spaces of another time linger on out of place?

THE MASTODON

DodoLab Presents:

The Thetford Travelling Menagerie

DodoLab Presents:

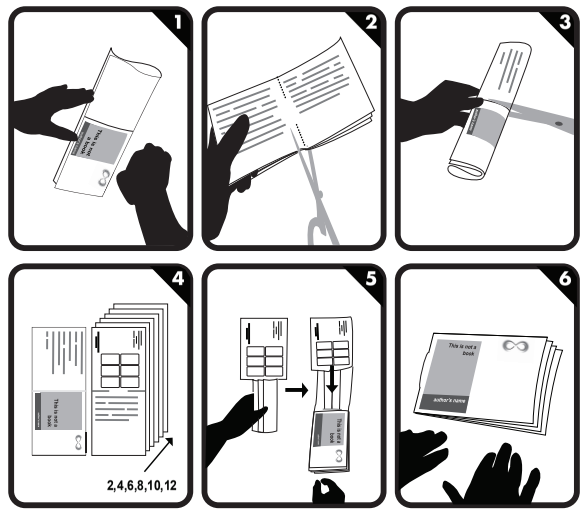
The Thetford Travelling Menagerie

Lisa Hirmer & Andrew Hunter, DodoLab

2011-03-10

dodolab

made with www.bookleteer.com from proboscis



DODOLAB WANTS TO KNOW ABOUT THETFORD!

Thetford Town Centre March 21-26th 2011

Visit our display at The Ancient House Museum,

And our display at The Thetford Library,

Then come see us at the market this Saturday, March 26th!

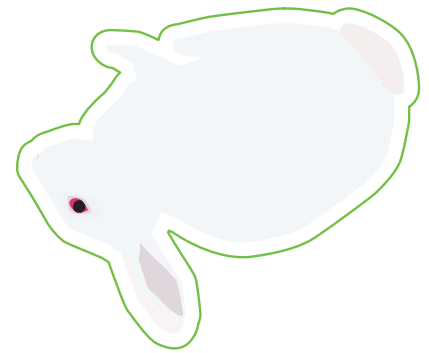
READ THE STORIES IN THIS BOOK, THEN TELL US WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT THETFORD!

ANSWER SOME OF OUR QUESTIONS, TELL US WHAT ANIMALS YOU WOULD ADD TO THE MENAGERIE, OR SHARE YOUR THETFORD STORIES.

DROP OFF YOUR RESPONSES AT THE LIBRARY OR THE ANCIENT HOUSE MUSEUM, OR BRING THEM TO US AT THE MARKET ON SATURDAY.

WE WILL USE YOUR RESPONSES TO CREATE A COLLECTION OF THETFORD STORIES!

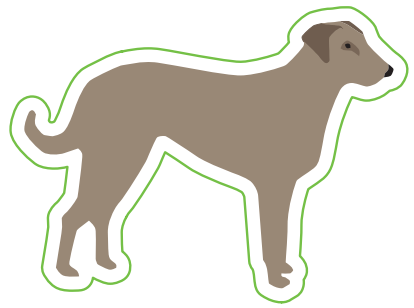
THE GHOST RABBIT



It appears, so we've heard, by the ruins of the old Warren Lodge out on Brandon Road, a giant white ghost rabbit with flaming red eyes. The woods and fields around the lodge are dotted with empty warrens, an undulating landscape of curious mounds. Rabbit farming was once a major and highly profitable business in the Thetford area and thrived here long after it had declined in other parts of Britain, where abandoned warrens are often mistaken for ancient burial sites or Roman defences. The warrens were heavily guarded as poaching was a serious threat with dire consequences for those caught, and a great danger to the warreners who managed a vast stock of rabbits raised for food and fur. The industry declined in the past century and the rabbits were largely wiped out by the disease *myxomatosis*. One can still see the occasional brown bunny hopping about and perhaps the ghost rabbit still lingers. It has been suggested that stories of a sinister phantom rabbit may have been told as a warning to make poachers stay away.

Stories can define a place, draw people in or drive them away, become a burden or a blessing. Thinking about the ghost rabbit made DodoLab think about other stories of Thetford. What are the things said and repeated that impact this community today?

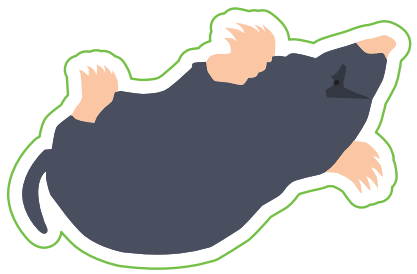
TELL US YOUR THETFORD STORIES!



THE LURCHER

The Lurcher is a hybrid, a crossing of a greyhound with another dog (often a collie or a terrier). Originating in Ireland, it is said they owe their existence to the banning of commoners from owning greyhounds by Queen Elizabeth I, and so that highly useful beast had to be modified to circumvent a royal decree. Associated with "gypsies" and travellers, they spread across the British Isles. Medium sized, slim, quick, smart and loyal, the local breed took on a distinct appearance, retaining the build of the greyhound under a shaggy coat of wiry hair. The name lurcher comes from the Rhomani word lur (meaning thief) and they were associated with poaching, ironic as they were also the dog of choice of the warreners who both raised and guarded the extensive rabbit colonies against poachers in this region. At Ancient House Museum, there is a wonderful old photograph of a group of warreners in their traditional embroidered smocks accompanied by an attentive crew of black and grey lurchers.

We are often confronted by rules we don't agree with, challenged by imposed orders, forced to conform to the directives of those in power that rub up against our own needs. The Lurcher is an inventive compromise, a creative bending of the rules, that has deep roots in the history and culture of the region. Does such inventiveness linger on here, and in response to what? ?



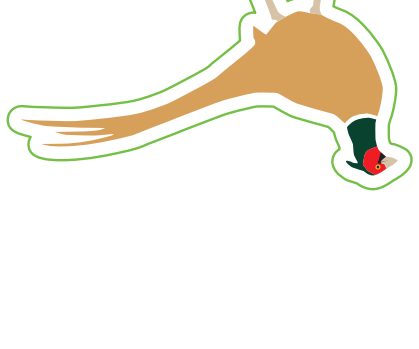
THE MOLE

Rarely seen, but clearly evident by its actions, *Talpa Europaea* is a voracious burrower beneath green spaces, farms and woodland, pushing up distinct earthen mounds wherever the soil is deep enough for tunnelling. A wily predator feasting on earthworms, snakes and lizards, the mole aggressively modifies its environment to suit its needs. Moving blindly through the darkness, its giant "hands" protrude from beneath a soft black cloak, deathly white skin tipped with long hard claws. Researchers say the planting of garlic will deter them, a method eerily reminiscent of a common defence against a shadowy figure of folklore that also lurks in darkness and hunts unseen. Such an association with the vampire (and remember it was to England that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* came to reside) is reinforced by the moles' extensive handiwork around the grounds of the old Abbey, the Priory of Our Lady of Thetford. Like the ruins of the Warrener's Lodge, the Abbey ruins are said to be haunted.

What else is here, but not here, known by its work, but rarely seen *in-the-flesh*, leaving traces of its actions and modifying the environment to suites its own needs? And what is done to deter such a presence?

DO YOU HAVE ANSWERS TO SOME OF OUR QUESTIONS?

WHAT ANIMALS WOULD YOU ADD TO THE MENAGERIE? AND WHY?



THE CANADA GOOSE

Branta Canadensis first landed in England in 1665, when it was introduced in St. James Park, London to join the waterfowl collection of King Charles II. St. James Park was largely the work of King James I, who had an impressive menagerie, including crocodiles, camels and elephants, along with an aviary of exotic birds. Such beasts would arrive as gifts from fellow rulers or as souvenir cargo brought back by explorers and traders. In the same decade that King James I developed St. James Park, Britain would begin the colonization of the Canada Goose's home range with its settlement of Jamestown (founded in 1607) on North America's eastern seaboard.

The Canada Goose has thrived in Britain, as it has in many places it has been introduced to, including Northern Europe. It brings its telltale "V" flying formation and distinctive honking, but also brings along an unfortunate tendency to despoil the terrain with its droppings. Introduced to England at an elegantly designed leisure park, these bird's seem to prefer such idyllic settings. They regularly frequent Thetford's Butten Island park and can be seen milling about the base of the bronze statue of the Maharajah Duleep Singh. Watching the familiar Canada Goose wander about the park, we wondered what other positive gestures may have had other unintended consequences?

active and that the unflattering characteristics usually associated with the bird may have been the result of encounters with captive birds – basically, specimens living in an artificial, human designed environment of overabundance.

The Dodo bird has become, for many, the symbol of extinction with phrases like "Dead as a dodo" and "Gone the way of the dodo" as catch phrases for failure and demise. Often implied, is that the bird was largely at fault for its own sad fate. However, the dodo had evolved (from an ancestral pigeon) to perfectly suit its isolated island home, adapting to the environment by becoming quite large and flightless (common adaptations on islands) – the perfect fit for an island free of predators. Sadly, when Europeans came to Mauritius (in 1598) they changed the environment, modifying the habitat and introducing such predatory species as cats, rats and pigs that fed on the dodos and their eggs. Dodos had evolved over millennia, but they could not adapt to such abrupt and catastrophic change. The dodo was extinct in less than a century, the last recorded living specimen died in 1680. It is sad and poignant that we often know the final date of a species' demise. The last Passenger Pigeon, for example, died at at the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914. Here name was Martha.

The dodo is our name/logo because we are concerned with the risks of an isolated existence and the great challenges we face when we try to adapt quickly to change. We also think a lot about how we can become trapped by the stories we tell, and ideas imposed on us, that limit our understandings of ourselves, others and the wider world, and create barriers to positive change. We often look to our fellow species and the natural world for lessons, fables/parables, and models to help us understand and rethink the challenges we face. Thetford inspired us to develop this idea further and we created our Menagerie with a nod to the many past travelling menageries that once brought the unusual and the unexpected to such gathering places as markets, fairs and town centres. Our goal with The Thetford Travelling Menagerie is to use stories and images of local animals to inspire people in the community to share their perceptions of Thetford today.

THE PHEASANT

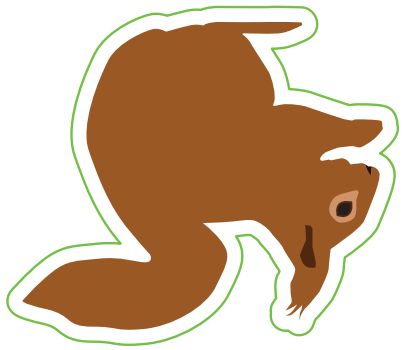
Phasianus Colchicus, like the rabbit, was first brought to Britain by the Romans. They are primarily associated with a highly organized and distinctly British form of hunting – a sport which has evolved from a traditional pastime into a major industry with birds commercially raised, released and hunted in vast numbers during annually organized "shoots." The elegant pheasant can be seen prancing about the landscape, across roads and fields, darting into the underbrush. The male's bold plumage is an adaptation ill suited to camouflaging its presence, seeming almost as though designed for the benefit of the shooters. "Tradition" is a term often associated with the pheasant shoot, and is a term that can swing between opposites. Many value the traditional roots of the pheasant shoot, while others see it negatively, as a pastime largely dominated by class and social distinctions. And then there are the divisions over the shoots' impact on the environment – is the annual release of pheasants a bonus or a bane to the environment? Has the natural landscape been preserved or artificially modified by the needs of the shoot?

Tradition is a tricky concept, it can both unify and divide, nurture a sense of community or encourage exclusion. What are other traditions here, and what are their potential consequences?

THE EUROPEAN STARLING

Another “vulgar” beast, *Sturnus Vulgaris* is, like the Red Squirrel, in decline locally. There are a number of possible explanations being researched in the Thetford area – and across the birds’ historic European range – including habitat loss, disease, pesticide use, and monoculture farming. But unlike the red rodent, starlings have been exported abroad and now thrive throughout North America. They were brought to New York City by Eugene Schieffel (President of the American Acclimatization Society), who wished to introduce all the songbirds mentioned in the plays of William Shakespeare to North America. Since then, they have become a major pest. The sixty breeding pairs introduced to Central Park in the 1890s, rapidly multiplied and spread widely. They now populate all corners of the continent, squeezing out such indigenous species as purple martins and blue birds. Starlings are highly adaptive, not only do they prosper in a variety of natural habitats, they also seem to be very well suited to abandoned buildings and decaying industrial sites.

In the fall of 2010, DodoLab was thrilled to see a massive flock form over Thetford, a great dark cloud drifting over Kings House in search of an evening roost. Standing next to the golden statue of Thomas Paine, we wondered about the things that have gone out from the Thetford area to impact the wider world, particularly North America?



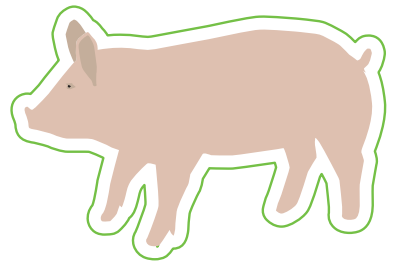
THE RED SQUIRREL

Once the only squirrel in Europe, *Sciuris Vulgaris* is being rapidly squeezed out by the larger and much more aggressive Eastern Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus Carolinensis*) that was introduced from North America in the late 1800s, possibly to satisfy Victorian’s appetites for things novel and curious. Their scientific name sounds both accurate and insulting, scurrying about but vulgar (the latter term actually refers to its commonness). *Sciurus Carolinensis* gets its name from King Charles, a squirrel of the Carolinas. Carolus is latin for Charles and this was the name Charles I first gave to the American colony that his son Charles II renamed Carolina (now divided into North and South Carolina). The Eastern Grey Squirrel thrives in North America’s Carolinean forests and also makes it on a number of lists of top destructive invasive species. The Red Squirrel with its distinctive red fur and tuft ears is now a rarity. Thetford Forest is said to be one of its last local habitats, but even there they are rarely seen.

North American influences have being felt throughout the world with mixed receptions. Watching the many grey squirrels scurrying about, we wondered about other examples of the presence of things North American in Thetford. What has come to replace the “vulgar” and the local?

Driving around the outskirts of Thetford, we saw a lot of farms with wide expanses of flattened earth dotted by special tents and many pigs. From a North American perspective, it is surprising to see farms with animals roaming about out of doors and in open areas. In North America, pigs are kept and raised indoors, mainly in large “factory” farms. The domestic pig will eat just about anything and can be fed on a wide variety of things that would otherwise be considered “waste.” Unfortunately, pigs are often depicted as dirty and lazy, or are seen to embody our worst traits (think of those despicable pigs in George Orwell’s Animal Farm). But if considered from another perspective, pigs are natural recyclers, taking what others no longer need or want, and turning it into something valuable.

In the core of Thetford, the high street is home to a lot of charity shops, the kinds of establishments that are often pointed to as signs of a downtown that may be struggling. But charity shops are also a positive means of keeping things in use, reducing waste, saving money and supporting many good causes. They can be seen as indicators of a community’s commitment to helping others and itself through recycling and reuse. We wondered what other opportunities exist in Thetford to keep materials and products in circulation? And what other positive traits are obscured by negative perceptions?



THE PIG

While populations of dodo birds never existed beyond the shores of their small island of Mauritius (in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa), there is a record of at least one live bird making it to England in the 17th century. Its stuffed remains ended up on exhibit in John Tredescant’s Museum in London and when Tredescant left his extensive collection to Elias Ashmole, it became part of the Ashmolean Museum collection at Oxford. Today, you can see the only existing dodo remains (a mummified head and foot) in the Museum of Natural History at Oxford University along with a reconstructed skeleton and a wonderful painting by the Flemish artist Jan Savery. Painted in 1651, it is likely based on a captive bird, and hence it appears quite plump and a little cartoonish, not the robust sleek bird researchers now believe the dodo to have been. Lewis Carroll saw the Oxford dodo (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, his real name, was a lecturer in Mathematics at Oxford) and he included the bird in *Alice’s Adventures through the Looking Glass*. Carroll’s dodo appears as a gentlemanly creature with a walking stick, who presents Alice with the trophy for winning an absurd and non-sensical foot race. Sadly, the dodo is most often associated with things absurd, foolish and stupid. It is typically understood to have been a slow, lazy, gluttinous bird with limited intelligence. Thanks to research on the Oxford dodo, however, it is now believed to have been reasonably intelligent and

THE DODO