**The Gallery of Medieval Life: A British Museum Partnership**

* As part of the Royal Palace Reborn project, a new Gallery of Medieval Life, developed in partnership with the British Museum, showcases exceptional artefacts from across the medieval period – from the Norman Conquest of 1066 to the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII in the 1530s.
* Focusing on the experiences of people from all levels of society, this atmospheric gallery presents over 900 medieval objects, drawing on Norfolk Museums Service’s nationally significant collections, as well as the long-term loan of over 50 objects from the British Museum and selected artefacts from other lenders. Many of these will be on public display for the first time.
* The range is phenomenal: from personal items such as an exquisitely carved ivory bobbin, excavated from Norwich Castle Keep’s basement, to elaborate scientific objects such as an astrolabe, used to make astronomical measurements; and from newly-conserved artefacts previously too fragile to display, to Treasure finds recently discovered by local metal detectorists and recorded through the British Museum’s Portable Antiquities Scheme. Together they tell the intriguing story of life in this fascinating period of history.
* The British Museum has a long-standing relationship with Norfolk Museums Service. From the inception of the Royal Palace Reborn project, there was an ambition to develop a Partnership Gallery that would be the British Museum’s first medieval gallery outside of London.
* Since 2003, the British Museum has worked with several partner museums to develop and maintain a series of Partnership Galleries, with the aim of sharing the national collection as widely as possible. Last year, around 8 million people in the UK saw a British Museum object outside of London, while there were 6.5 million visitors to the London site.
* British Museum Partnership Galleries are now at seven locations around the UK, including Glasgow, Newcastle, Carlisle, York, Truro, Manchester and Norwich. Manchester Museum’s South Asia Gallery was awarded Permanent Exhibition of the Year in the Museums + Heritage Awards 2024. The Museum is also working with Shrewsbury Museum to develop the first Prehistoric Partnership Gallery.
* These permanent galleries are developed collaboratively from their inception, with the British Museum supporting curatorial research, object selection, interpretation, design and display. As is the case in Norwich, they also provide many long-term opportunities for collaboration across research and scientific analysis. The galleries bring together partner museum collections with carefully chosen objects from the British Museum to create unique long-term displays.

**Key Themes of the Gallery**

The gallery frames Norfolk, and East Anglia more broadly, within the world of medieval Europe. The displays showcase archaeological objects, mostly found in Norfolk through excavations and metal-detecting, alongside paintings, manuscripts, sculpture, metalwork and textiles. Together they showcase the material culture of medieval people and demonstrate the diversity of the objects they used to dress, work, and display their personalities, beliefs and status in everyday life over the 500 years of the period. The gallery explores this world by looking at a society divided into three groups described by medieval chroniclers as those who worked, fought or prayed.

* **Those Who Pray**
  + The western Christian Church, led by the Pope, was a defining feature of medieval Europe. In an age when religious beliefs were woven through all aspects of life, the Church oversaw the spiritual life of most people living in western Europe, from birth to death.
  + **Object highlights:** The Gallery displays objects and manuscripts used to conduct religious services, as well as artworks and furnishings which adorned churches and monasteries. Norfolk was famous for its two major pilgrim shrines, at Walsingham and Bromholm, and recent finds from both are shown alongside precious treasures like a twelfth-century enamelled casket, used to house religious relics.
* **Those Who Fight**
  + At the top of medieval society were monarchs, supported by an aristocratic land-owning warrior class. Jostling for power and royal favour, this small group of people oversaw the development of the nations that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages.
  + The Gallery of Medieval Life explores the ways in which this ruling class engaged with the world from the weaponry they used, to the art and culture their wealth allowed them to commission.
  + **Object highlights:** On display are rare pieces of armour such as helmets, a breastplate found in Norwich, a wooden pavise shield, and swords including an exceptional single-bladed falchion. There is even a complete fourteenth-century breech-loading cannon, trawled up in a fishing net off Lowestoft!
* **Those Who Work**
  + For the majority of Europe’s medieval population, life revolved around their villages and the land, growing crops and rearing livestock to support themselves and their families. A rising population went alongside the growth of towns and cities, reliant upon the surplus food produced by farming. This rise in urbanism was accompanied by the increasing prosperity of merchants across Europe connected by rivers and the sea, moving goods and raw materials over ever greater distances.
  + **Object highlights:** This section of the gallery shows many archaeological finds made in Norfolk that demonstrate the vibrancy of the various trades undertaken, as well as how those without status and wealth chose to dress and remember themselves. Among the discoveries are oyster shells that had been used as paint palettes, complete with surviving traces of red and blue paint within, a remarkably preserved wooden shovel and a rare imported chest made of Polish oak.

**Key Objects**

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| **Top 20** |  |
| **Ashwellthorpe Triptych** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| This remarkably well-preserved altarpiece vividly shows the religious devotion and social status of a prominent south Norfolk family. It is the earliest known commission from a Flemish artist for a Norfolk family and illustrates the region’s long-standing cultural connections with the Low Countries. | |
| **Matlaske reliquary pendant** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| In about 1850 a waggon driver pulling into a gateway in Matlaske, Norfolk, discovered this delicately crafted gold pendant, engraved with a scene of the Crucifixion between St John the Baptist and a bishop saint. Its shape evokes the Tau cross, suggesting it once contained a relic associated with St Anthony. | |
| **Astrolabe** | British Museum |
| Astrolabes are complex instruments used to make astronomical measurements. This fourteenth century example was probably made in Spain. | |
| **Dormition of the Virgin alabaster** | On loan from the community of More House |
| This monumental sculpture stands nearly a metre high and depicts the Virgin Mary’s Assumption and Coronation as Queen of Heaven. The panel was originally brightly painted. | |
| **Ivory Bobbin** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| This tiny object, dating from 1100-1150, is beautifully carved in the Romanesque style with human and dragon heads. Discovered in the basement of Norwich Castle Keep, it probably belonged to one of the earliest high-status ladies who lived in the Castle when it was first built. | |
| **Labours of the Months stained glass roundels** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| The Labours of the Months were popular scenes in medieval art. Each month was represented by the image of an activity, usually agricultural. These roundels show March (tree pruning), September (grape harvesting), April or November (rain showers) and December or January (feasting). | |
| **Châtelaine de Vergi casket** | British Museum |
| Across the sides and lid of this 14th-century ivory casket are scenes from a courtly love poem called the Romance of the Châtelaine de Vergi. It evocatively depicts the tragic story of a secret relationship between a knight in the service of the Duke of Burgundy and the duke’s niece, the châtelaine. | |
| **Lion tympanum from Thetford** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| A tympanum is the decorative sculpture that fills the semi-circular space above a door or window. This crouching lion once sat above a doorway in St Mary’s Priory in Thetford, one of the earliest and most important Norman monasteries in East Anglia. In 1114 the monks moved to a larger site and this lion comes from one of those new buildings. | |
| **Limoges chasse** | British Museum |
| Caskets like this were among the most widely used containers for holy relics. In the middle of the front panel is a large image of the Virgin and Child, shown as a majestic figure seated on a throne. It was made in the French city of Limoges, which was famed for its enamel work. | |
| **Baltic chest from St Margaret de Westwick Church, Norwich** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| Six of these chests survive in Kent and Norfolk, and this example is one of the most complete of the group. Their presence in these coastal counties was due to the Baltic trade. The chests were imported from what is now north Germany or north Poland. | |
| **Wymondham lead coffin** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| This tiny coffin was discovered in Wymondham Abbey churchyard in 1833. It shows the love and reverence one rich family paid to their child, and the challenges of life in the medieval world. | |
| **Falchion** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| Falchions are single-edged swords designed to be held in one hand. They were often light and probably intended as slashing weapons. Despite being submerged for centuries in the River Yare this example is in incredible condition. | |
| **St Christopher statue** | Norfolk Museums Service, on loan from Terrington St Clement PCC |
| Remarkably complete, this statue of St Christopher wading through a river with the Christ Child on his shoulder is from the church of Terrington St Clement in west Norfolk. It is carved from a particularly soft form of limestone called clunch and probably originally stood on a plinth on the west front tower. | |
| **Bromholm prayer roll** | Private loan |
| Bromholm Priory in north Norfolk became an important English pilgrimage shrine in the early 1220s after it was given a piece of wood said to be from the True Cross of Christ’s Crucifixion. This remarkable manuscript contains text and images commemorating the suffering and death of Christ on the Cross. It was probably made as a luxury product for sale to a wealthy pilgrim to Bromholm, to use as an aid for prayer and contemplation. | |
| **Cadmus and Scylla bowls** | British Museum |
| These 12th-century bowls were found in Gloucestershire in 1824, when the foundations for Haw Bridge on the River Severn were being dug. They are engraved with stories drawn from mythology, from the Labours of Hercules to Orpheus and Eurydice. They reveal how medieval people engaged with classical literature. | |
| **Prince Henry seal matrix** | British Museum |
| The future King Henry V as Prince of Wales’s seal was a visual statement of his power. He is shown as an armed knight on horseback with his sword raised and his shield displaying the royal arms of England. | |
| **Great Bascinet** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| Bascinets are the most frequently mentioned type of helmet in medieval documents. This helmet was probably made in England, making it a rare surviving example. It was found on Mousehold Heath overlooking Norwich, where Robert Kett camped with his army in 1549 when rebelling against King Edward VI. | |
| **List of Norwich mayors** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| This document lists the mayors and sheriffs of Norwich who were in office between 1403 and 1516. Many of these men were merchants and grocers by trade. | |
| **Oyster shell palettes** | Norfolk Museums Service |
| Remains of pigment still survive in these oyster shell palettes. Manuscript illustrations and excavations from across Britain show that oyster shells were often used by artists to hold and mix paints. | |
| **Vervel of Henry IV** | British Museum |
| A unique survivor, this small gold disc is a precious metal tag that would have been attached to the jesses or leather strips on the leg of a bird of prey owned by King Henry IV. It has a Latin inscription that makes a declaration of the bird’s ownership: ‘sum regis angliae’, meaning I am or I am owned by the king of England. | |