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## “Our Home in Harlow”: Building an Identity of Place at a Local History Museum

### Résumé

*Harlow, en Essex, fut désignée pour être une « ville nouvelle » en 1947 afin d’alléger la surpopulation du Londres d’après-guerre. Avant cette expansion urbaine, Harlow était un petit village rural. Cet article examine la manière dont le musée d’histoire locale de la ville sert d’espace représentationnel où les histoires anciennes et modernes, les objets du quotidien, les expériences personnelles et la mémoire constituent un récit de Harlow en tant que lieu, donnant forme à des notions de ce que signifie appartenir à la ville. En tant que ville constituée de deux parties distinctes sur le plan spatial et conceptuel – le vieux Harlow et la ville de Harlow – le musée fait office de médiateur dans les compréhensions du lieu identitaire.*

### Abstract

*Harlow, Essex was designated a “new town” in 1947 to relieve overcrowding in postwar London. Prior to this urban expansion, Harlow was a small rural village. This paper examines how the town’s local history museum works as a representational space wherein old and modern histories, everyday objects, personal experience and memory form a narrative of Harlow as a place, shaping notions of what it means to belong to the town. As a town made up of two conceptually and spatially distinct parts—old Harlow and Harlow Town—the museum works as a mediator in understandings of place-identity.*

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Harlow, Essex is situated about forty kilometres northeast of London. The town is part of the city’s commuter belt—the busy M11 motorway running nearby and London Liverpool St. station, a forty-minute, high-speed train ride away. Fields of wheat and barley, and great, black weather-boarded barns also characterize the Harlow landscape, as the scenic Essex countryside surrounds the town. Part medieval agricultural village, part postwar modernist “new town,” Harlow is a combination of both old and modern, rural and urban spaces merged together in 1947 to form a new community and a new place-identity. This paper is concerned with how a town that is both very old and very new is embodied in its local history museum, and how concepts of place, local identity and belonging are shaped through the museum’s historical representations of the town. What is Harlow?

### The Old Town and the New Town

Harlow is a complex town made up of multiple neighbourhoods, but is commonly divided by old and new spaces based on architecture and geography: Old Harlow, encompassing an earlier, historic village, and Harlow New Town, encompassing a modern development of the mid 20th century. The two areas are separated by a landscaped green belt, but both spaces—as well as surrounding rural hamlets—are considered as officially belonging to “Harlow.” While Harlow is in fact an old town as much as a new town, outsider perceptions often fix the region as encompassing only a new town—the old town and its people having been subsumed by the new. In reality, much of the historic character of Old Harlow persists: the area known today as Old Harlow includes the medieval village centered on St. Mary’s Church at Churchgate Street and the

market at Mulberry Green, both having existed as early as the 12th and 13th centuries. The areas of Market Street and High Street, and the surrounding rural hamlets also make up Old Harlow. Harlowbury, the principal manorial estate, lies to the north of Mulberry Green.

As a settlement, the Harlow area dates back to the Late Iron and Roman Ages. As a parish, Harlow is recorded in the Domesday book of 1086. A local pottery industry flourished in the Potter Street area, reaching peak production during the 17th century. Harlow, however, was largely agricultural, and the town served as a small market centre. Mid-16th-century dwellings and almshouses remain throughout Old Harlow, as well as Georgian houses, Victorian workers cottages and schools, and several inns.<sup>1</sup> There is a “High Street”<sup>2</sup> with small shops, real estate office, post office, library and nearby, a bus shelter and small train station at Harlow Mill.

The population of Harlow and surrounding area was only 4,500 when the rural locale was designated a “new town” by the first postwar Labour government on March 25, 1947.<sup>3</sup> The village had experienced little change since the 19th century, but the new town designation meant that 60,000 newcomers (and the housing and infrastructure required to support them) would drastically alter the village and its hamlets in the surrounding countryside (Gibberd et al. 1980). Often labelled a social experiment, the new town phenomenon was a British movement for planned, affordable housing and the decentralization of congested, industrially concentrated cities (Schaffer 1972). Besides Harlow, several new towns were built near London around pre-existing rural village cores, including Stevenage and Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire and Basildon, Essex.

New towns—model, self-contained communities with modern housing, industrial enterprise and shopping—were planned with the purpose of providing a quality life for Britain’s working classes (Mullan 1980). Reflecting on new town development, Anthony Alexander suggests that under the new town designation, Britain’s working classes were promised “better living conditions, better housing, and jobs in modern factories” (2009: 17-18). The garden city movement of the early 20th century—producing planned towns like Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire (1920)—was a forerunner of new town government legislation. Largely promoted by Ebenezer Howard, the garden city concept offered the ideological groundings of the new town movement: a desire for “towns

designed for healthy living and industry; of a size that makes possible a full measure of social life but not larger, surrounded by a rural belt” (Osborn and Whittick 1969: 36).

While the *New Towns Act* of 1946 was in part an ideological move—social reform was sweeping the country and legislation with similar social aims was being implemented, such as the *National Health Service Act* (1946)—it was also a practical policy response to the postwar reality of Britain. The Blitz had destroyed much of London, and overcrowded slums were a harsh reality. Britain was faced with a serious housing crisis. The Harlow Development Corporation Board was formed through the Ministry of Town and Country Planning to implement new town development in Harlow, and Sir Frederick Gibberd was commissioned to design the new town’s architectural master plan. Government approved the master plan in 1949 and construction began, but new towns faced resistance and unpopularity with established farmers and residents of the designated villages (Fig. 1).



Integrating an old community with a new community was not easy, and local residents anticipated new towns would destroy the established character and social atmosphere of their communities. Osborn writes,

...[T]here was resentment and tough opposition on the part of owners of the land that had to be compulsorily acquired in assembling the sites, and by private residents who had settled in pleasant countrified surroundings and did not want their Arcadia invaded by what they

**Fig. 1**  
*Transforming the Harlow countryside. Mark Hall North under construction in 1951. Used with permission of the Museum of Harlow.*

envisaged as a horde of urban slum-dwellers. (1977: 59)<sup>4</sup>

While many farmers were subsequently displaced by new town development, as Ben Hyde Harvey, General Manager of Harlow Development Corporation (1955-1973) explains, in the context of Harlow the population felt a sense of the “inevitability” of planned development, and the designation of the new town was less of a struggle than at nearby Stevenage (Gibberd et al. 1980: 13-16).

Today, Harlow New Town occupies a rectangular site of about 2,500 hectares extending west and south from Old Harlow, and has a population of fewer than 80,000.<sup>5</sup> The town centre—the main commercial and local council administrative area—is about three kilometres southwest of Old Harlow. Several residential neighbourhoods and parks enclose the town centre. Most of the modern Gibberd-designed architecture is of concrete construction and, increasingly, English Heritage is listing these buildings as architecturally and historically significant.<sup>6</sup>

## The Museum of Harlow

The Museum of Harlow is a small local history museum located in the Georgian brick stable block of the former Mark Hall, Old Harlow.<sup>7</sup> Administered by the Harlow Town Council with an operating budget of about £140,000, the museum maintains a full-time staff of four, supported by a handful of volunteers. The museum is a community museum not only because of its representations of Harlow life, but in its engagement with a primarily local set of visitors through programming and education initiatives, and through its role as an accessible

public space for Harlow residents. A garden surrounds the converted stable block, where on sunny days children and their mothers enjoy the extensive grounds. Inside the museum, four permanent galleries arranged in chronological order are concerned with the human occupation and development of the Harlow area, from pre-history through to the Romans, the medieval town, Stuart, Georgian and Victorian eras and, finally, the story of the modern new town. In addition, a historical bicycle collection lines the walls and glass atrium. The museum also contains a local records office and archives, with a collection that deals mainly with the development of Harlow New Town. The Museum of Harlow, then, intends to tell the story of both old and new Harlow.

The Museum of Harlow has been housed in its current grade-II-listed building, Mark Hall stable, since 2002. The museum opened in 1973 as the Harlow Museum in Passmore—a Georgian house—located on the other side of the town. It operated there until 1999 when the Harlow Town Council made a policy choice to rationalize the Harlow Museum,<sup>8</sup> the Mark Hall Cycle Museum (now the current Museum of Harlow site) and the town records office. These combined collections were re-branded as the Museum of Harlow, and fresh museum exhibits were designed for the new location. School visits and children’s holiday activities characterize the museum’s programming. The museum also serves as a community resource by facilitating occasions for groups of elderly residents to come together to reminisce, and through special community collaborative projects that document and share the experience of living in Harlow.<sup>9</sup>

The Museum of Harlow, then, works as a cultural space wherein a mix of activities, objects and texts combine to give meaning to the town as a place with a distinct community identity (Fig. 2). Because local history museums are associated with a small constituency, they are useful microcosms within the museum world to focus an analysis of how museums shape their community’s definitions of place (Levin 1997; 2007). As Bella Dicks suggests, “it is at the level of locality, ... that heritage’s representations of ‘place’ and ‘community’ needs to be further interrogated” (2000: 51).

As a phenomenon that preserves and represents a localized past, the local history museum embodies community identity and is a producer of notions of place and belonging, asserting community distinctiveness and the historical and contemporary value of a place. As Kotler and Kotler point out, local history museums “strengthen community

**Fig. 2**  
*The Museum of Harlow is located in the former Mark Hall stable block (ca. 1785). Photo: Gerald Pocius.*





ties [and] reinforce the sense of belonging” (2004: 178). How does the Museum of Harlow function as a forum for understandings of community identity, place and belonging, especially in a town with such a diverse historical background?

## Method

The methodology for this paper is framed around a descriptive and critical analysis of the Museum of Harlow in order to determine the meanings the museum conveys about Harlow as a place. Texts, objects and displays in all museum galleries were analyzed, but particular emphasis is directed toward the fourth gallery, which focuses on the mid 19th through the 20th century of the Harlow story. An observational approach was utilized which gauged the interactions between visitors, displays and objects within the museum. Interviews were also carried out with three staff members—Chris Lydamore, Museum Manager, Claire Hooper, Education Officer and David Devine, Local History Officer—supplemented by a combined interview and museum tour with Chris and Claire, who together curated the museum exhibits.<sup>10</sup> These interviews provide context on the role and development of the museum, but most importantly they offer staff perspectives on the representation of Harlow’s history within the museum. This paper, then, provides a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the Museum of Harlow based on what the displays and objects convey, how visitors interact with those displays and objects, and how staff view and direct the museum in its relationship to, and representation of, this particular place—a place with divergent pasts.

## Building Community at The Museum of Harlow

On some days the Museum of Harlow is a series of silent rooms with only the occasional visitor pondering over a piece of Stuart ceramics or reading a text panel on the decline of the Metropolitan Ware industry in the Harlow area. On other days, the museum is abuzz with activity, especially during the summer when children and their parents or grandparents visit the museum to participate in special holiday activities. The week I visited the museum in summer 2009, children were working clay to produce Roman pots, an acknowledgment of Harlow’s Roman occupation, when the town once served as a temple site in the far reaches of

the Roman Empire. On these busy days, the sense of the museum as a public community space is most apparent. Children, in history-sleuth mode, rush from gallery to gallery searching for answers to clues posed on their activity sheets. Others in period costumes—a ploughman’s shirt, a farm girl’s bonnet, a gentleman’s top hat—amuse themselves by playing historical dress-up in front of the full-length mirror. When I meet Claire Hooper, she’s smeared in gray clay, just finishing a long day of moulding clay pots and little minds about the story of Roman Harlow. She grabs a cup of tea, and we talk about her role within the museum.

As the museum’s education officer Claire has worked with the site since 1995, but points out that as with all small museums, her job description is varied. “You have to have your fingers in lots of pies,” she says. Her role as education officer involves teaching, but also encompasses access, audience development and outreach. As such, her job focuses on the Museum of Harlow’s role within the local community. As Elizabeth Crooke offers, “communities need the histories and identities preserved and interpreted in museums; and the museum sector needs the people, in the many communities, to recognize the value of museums and justify their presence” (2007: 1). Considering this reciprocal relationship, how does the Museum of Harlow impact its community, and how does it contribute to a sense of community identity and belonging in the town?

For Claire, the Museum of Harlow is a shared, social space that serves as a cultural compass for the community, wherein longtime residents and newcomers alike can find a common link and a common identity. The idea of collectivity and of a collective history is emphasized, so that the history represented within the museum can be viewed as something that anchors and gives roots to the town, shaping it into an interconnected whole. In visiting the museum, in exploring and actively participating in the history of the town through exhibits and programs, the museum is a space that draws people together. Claire says:

What I want is for the people of the town to have some sort of point of reference within the town about their history, because I really believe it’s important for a community to have history, and a shared history. And even if you’ve been in the town twenty years or only ten minutes, the museum is somewhere where the history of Harlow belongs to everybody. The objects don’t belong to the staff; they belong to the town.

Chris Lydamore has been the museum's manager since 2002. When I ask him to characterize the Museum of Harlow, he emphasizes that the site is foremost a community museum. In a similar sense of understanding, local history officer David Devine makes an analysis of the name of the museum. He remarks: "The first thing to say is that it's very much a Museum of Harlow.<sup>11</sup> A strange name, but it used to just be called Harlow Museum. But we purposefully changed the name of it when we moved to the new site, to emphasize the change in emphasis ... we are a local museum."

Staff member responses emphasize the role of community and place in the museum, and the civic responsibility of the museum toward a local constituency—an obligation that involves "community cohesion," Chris Lydamore suggests. This concept of community cohesion in museum contexts is defined by Elizabeth Crooke as relating to the "psychological sense of community," based on a sense of belonging, rootedness, social ties and group solidarity (2007: 46). The idea of museums as forums for the expression of place-identity is well acknowledged (Davis 2007; Dicks 2000; Kaplan 1994). This emphasis on place appears more pronounced in local history museums, however, as they are spaces as much concerned with the particulars of locale as the particulars of time. As Dicks observes, "images of community, in particular, are omnipresent at local heritage museums," so that local heritage museums reflect a "reinvigoration of the community ideal" (2000: 51).

In her study of local history or "pioneer" museums in Ontario, Mary Tivy argues that local history museums draw on romanticized pioneer narratives to link perceived pioneer virtues—such as sense of community—with notions of civic success (1993: 36). Tivy maintains, "community museums are ... envisioned as spiritual conduits, transmitting the values of the past in a moral narrative to the present" (37) in order to help build a successful community. In gallery four, exhibits detailing the development of the new town are often framed around nostalgic visions of a pioneer past. The development of the new town beginning in 1947 serves as the historical narrative from which to reaffirm and convey a sense of community cohesion. Interpretive panels refer to new residents moving to Harlow Town as "pioneers," suggesting that these new residents forged an early sense of community in the town, creating a sense of place and collectiveness in an unknown, new landscape that has shaped the town into its current success as an Essex community.

The creation of the new town was filled with challenges for newcomers and established rural villagers, who were compelled to amalgamate, integrate and form a new community. The panels suggest that these newcomers—or mid-20th-century suburban "pioneers"—demonstrated real community cooperation, working together to make the new space of the architect-planned neighbourhoods a "real home." The new town displays reinforce particular notions of community upon the visiting local audience, presenting a group of historical forefathers and a sense of historical lineage that instills a sense of community and belonging. Their pioneering attitudes toward community building is one, the museum posits, which should be admired and emulated today.

A town with a story rooted in cooperation and neighbourliness is further pursued within the museum's dialogue. The new town exhibit panels relate the story of the creation of the new town not through its architectural plans, but through the experience of residents. The panel "Moving In" deals with issues surrounding how new residents transformed Harlow New Town from an architectural scheme into an integrated town with a sense of community, and deals with the issues of making new friends and fitting within a pre-existing local community with a long-standing past. Drawing on first person oral histories, this panel relates a newcomer's experience in fostering a sense of community within the new town:

Next day we were surprised by the milkman knocking, with a tray of tea. He had started the tradition for the first tenants and that tenant had passed it on to the next tenant and so on. ... But the milkman would carry the tray. It meant that the tenants would make new friends and the milkman would make new customers – Pat Briggs talking to *Harlow Talking Newspaper* in 1997.

This neighbourly account reiterates what David Devine suggests: "Harlow is very much a community town. The sense of community has been here since the new town, and indeed earlier."

Another exhibition panel entitled "Making a Life in Harlow" demonstrates how the Museum of Harlow places particular emphasis on building community by seeking to relate the experiences of mid-20th-century new town newcomers with those of more recent, immigrant newcomers. The text reads:

Since the first residents moved to Harlow New Town in the late 1940s, Harlow has been home

to thousands of people. Many of the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the early 'pioneers' still live in Harlow as do many people who have moved to the town from around Britain and the world.

As a new town Harlow has a high proportion of residents who were not born in the town. The experiences of these 'pioneers' as they settled in to their new surroundings and made friends are mirrored today by people who have moved to the town more recently.

These texts suggest that there are still new "pioneers" in Harlow who can draw parallels to the experience of new town settlers in the mid 20th century. The panel text attempts to show a common experience for the community, and a sense of belonging for all. The diversity in residents' backgrounds is acknowledged and positively valued. The panels are a 2007 addition to gallery four, part of the museum's "Newcomers Project" which, to mark the 60th year of Harlow New Town, attempted to document the cultural diversity of the town, and engage the museum with its minority constituents. The project had an underlying theme that sought to show the history and community of the new town as an ongoing process, and place a diversity of town people within that process, stimulating more inclusive community building and making wider links between the museum and the community.<sup>12</sup>

Chris Lydamore relates that the Museum of Harlow attempts to foster a sense of pride in the town and a sense of community, to counteract some of the negative perceptions that surround Harlow and its status as a new town, which, because of its working class underpinnings and modernist architecture, is perceived to be coarse, concrete and history/culture-less:

As a new town, its nice to say we have a museum ... that we are a rounded complete community. And that is an important thing for a town to be able to say. If you don't have a museum, people often think you are cultureless or slightly adrift. So it's very nice for local people to say "we're not just this fictional thing, these blocks in the middle of Essex. We are a bona fide community, we value our heritage."

Chris further reflects:

Harlow isn't a concrete jungle. ... It has a history and a heritage and culture all its own. ... The whole point with what they did with the new town, is that they were making a home for people. ... If we don't reflect on that, then we're not really telling the story of the New

Town, we're telling the story of an architect's model, which isn't what the town is about.

Despite having a recent history, the Museum of Harlow legitimizes Harlow Town as a place that has actively developed, and preserves, a sense of community—a place that values the kind of civic status a local museum represents. While the panels inside the museum display recollections and images of residents moving to Harlow and making a home and community there, the Museum of Harlow itself has become a part of the Harlow community, asserting by its very presence within the town that Harlow is a place that values history and community. The very space of the museum holds within it the opportunity for visitors to experience the longevity of the old town with the challenges faced in the development of the new town.

### Understanding Harlow as Place

In simple terms, place can be defined as a space that people have made meaningful. Agnew describes space, place and their distinction: "[S]pace refers to location somewhere and place to the occupation of that location. Space is about having an address and place is about living at that address. ... Place is specific and space is general" (2005: 82). The concept of place is a way of understanding the environment in which one lives. It is seeing and knowing, and it is experience, meaning, emotional attachment and connection (Cresswell 2004). In this sense, Harlow as a place is more than a geographical locality. As Davis remarks, "[place] is a web of understanding between people and the environment, between people and their neighbours, between people and their history" (2007: 70).

A sense of place, then, is about how the process of human attachment to a location creates a distinct community identity, expressed through forms like landscape, memory, emotion, objects and history. Kyring (2007) observes that reasons for visiting local history museums are strongly linked to place, as "the desire to connect to a locale, to understand it, identify with it, or simply enjoy its distinctiveness is a common impulse that a close-by museum serves to satisfy" (2007: 2). Local museums are important repositories of the tangible and intangible forms that define place, preserving and reinforcing through local history, a sense of rootedness for local constituents. As Fyfe and Ross suggest, people "readily conceptualize locality and identity through the visual vocabulary of museums" (1996: 127). What does the museum say about Harlow as

a place? How do the material objects and stories representative of the town shape a sense of place? How does the Museum of Harlow contribute to a sense of the town as a meaningful location? How is a sense of place conveyed and affirmed at the Museum of Harlow?

The first two galleries of the Museum of Harlow deal with the pre-history of Harlow area, focusing on the archaeological evidence of Iron Age and Roman settlements. These two galleries are based on the artifact and are grounded in archaeological evidence, offering the visitor a material engagement with the distant past. The third gallery deals with medieval Harlow through to the early 19th century, and the first half of gallery four deals with Victorian and early-20th-century Old Harlow—periods for most visitors that are beyond memory and experience. These galleries, then, are concerned with telling the story of Old Harlow, or Harlow before new town development. Emphasis is placed on the medieval landscape, ceramic making, agricultural work and workers, country estates, Victorian schooling and the local effort during the First and Second World Wars (Fig. 3). For the majority of Harlow residents history, place and community begin in 1949 with the construction of the new town. If the history of much of Harlow is recent, how does history beyond personal or family memory—history of the more distant past—contribute to a sense of place for residents of both the old and new spaces of Harlow?

The identification of place names is employed as a place-building strategy at the Museum of

Harlow. In gallery three, a large framed map outlines the medieval landscape of the town. It was a main source used by new town developers in naming streets, roads and neighbourhoods during the new town's construction phases. Places like "The Downs," "Great Plumtree," "Millfield" and "Wardhatch" are neighbourhoods of modern Harlow based on medieval geographic references. While locations are not the same as in medieval times, their origins stem from place names on this medieval map. As these ancient names have become woven into the fabric of everyday life in modern Harlow—repeated to cab drivers, written on envelopes, read in telephone books—visitors to the museum view the map and recognize familiar names within the historical geography of the area. This recognition becomes important, as visitors have something to bring to the story themselves.

The education program seeks to develop a sense of belonging for children by delivering programming that incorporates their home street into the history of the town. Because the streets and roads of the new town draw their names from medieval era place names, people and other points throughout Harlow's history before new town development, children are fascinated to learn the historical origins of their street names, linking their home to the larger history of the town, and reaffirming their sense of place within it. School children often point to an old image of a local school classroom that is still in use, identifying with the familiar. "And that ties you into the town, it gives you a sense of belonging, a sense of sort of feeling," suggests Claire. "Particularly in the curriculum, I think a lot is covered about how the town works, how the town grew, and your place in it. So I think ... we're here to help people understand their place in the town—that sense of place." As Davis acknowledges, "museums are important because they serve to remind us of who we are and what our place is in the world" (2007: 53).

The idea of the town's landscape and its buildings are utilized in museum exhibits in order to engender a sense of place for local visitors. "Then and now" flip-cards in gallery four are a series of photographs of buildings and streets within Old Harlow, mainly geographical or cultural landmarks. The first side of the card shows an image and description of the location in the past, while the reverse of the card shows what the location looks like in the present. The cards show how the town has remained the same or how the landscape has altered throughout the course of time. The cards

**Fig. 3**  
*Ceramics on display at the Museum of Harlow.*  
*Photo: Gerald Pocius.*





help solidify for visitors the impression of the town's landscape both in the past and in the present, encouraging visitors to recognize and identify with the locations and landscapes highlighted. While the landscape is positioned within a narrative of change and progression, the flip-cards mostly show buildings and streets that have endured within the landscape, or have retained elements of their original structure and appearance. The then and now cards are a simple but effective exhibition tactic that helps visitors understand the Harlow built landscape, contributing to the development of a sense of place, both old and new.

In the same way, the prevalence of photographs throughout the gallery four exhibits reveal the local landscape as an indicator of place. One corner of gallery four is dedicated to a local Victorian benefactor, John Perry Watlington. Because the museum collection included a large ceramic bust of Watlington, Claire decided to work around the object and contextualize his role within the Victorian Harlow community. Several photographs on the panels show buildings erected through his generosity, like the former police station and the Old Harlow fire station. The recognition of familiar buildings emerges as a key response to the text panel, more so than notions of Watlington's largess. I recognized the fire station immediately as a landmark of Old Harlow, as I had walked past it several times during my summer there. Local residents may also recognize these aspects of the built landscape, and set value upon them as objects representative of place within the town. In employing images of the built landscape, a generational link to place is also suggested. Chris, who was born and raised in the town, says his children develop a link to place from these buildings. "I walked past that one and that one when I walked home from school; my sister went to that school," he says as he points out the buildings on the panel:

I used to go to church there and that was my prep school, so when we go past these sites, they [his children] get excited because I walk past with them and say "I used to go there." And these are the triggers that help people to value the town. It's not just historic because of John Perry Watlington, but it's also historic because "my dad likes that" and therefore they like it, and hopefully they will do the same for their children.

In other words, using images of these buildings in the museum not only reinforces a sense of place through the visual landscape of the town, but in

emphasizing generational links, the museum helps define place for Harlow residents.

When you move through gallery four at the Museum of Harlow, a large L-shape divider positions you in a short passageway running between the divider and the left wall. On your left, against the wall, are display cases with a miscellany of objects from the 1920s and 30s: golden lipstick tubes, an early electric iron, slender leather gloves. On your right, set within the dividing wall, are two glass display cases. Text panels on either side of the glass detail the involvement of Harlow in the First and Second World Wars. A tin of food rations and a gas mask, a tall pair of soldier's riding boots and three silk embroidered postcards from France serve as tangible reminders of their war experiences for Old Harlow townspeople. Ahead, at the end of the passageway, photos and panels show Sir Frederick Gibberd's new town master plan in various construction stages. Rounding the corner on your right, toward the other side of the L-shaped divider, the vibrancy of a large, blue enamel sign commands attention: HARLOW TOWN, it announces (Fig. 4). The old rail station sign indicates that the visitor has come to a certain place. In the design of the gallery, the sign literally and symbolically identifies Harlow Town as a distinct place as the visitor travels out of the past—from wood to concrete, from farm villages to postwar industrial Britain—and into the era of the new town. These two different towns are now considered in one space.

Texts about familiar activities like shopping on the High Street, sports, recreation and local clubs and organizations within the town create a civic picture that is familiar and rooted in place. Overall, a collective history is conveyed within the new town exhibit—a history embedded in the biographies of local people who moved to, and helped make, the town, and in the narratives of Harlow New Town's

**Fig. 4**  
*A Harlow station sign ushers visitors into the new town exhibit area.*  
*Author photo.*





emergence as more than an architectural plan; it is a place rooted in both an ancient and modern past. The emotion of moving to, and then coming to belong to Harlow is largely communicated through oral history excerpts. Many of the new residents who moved to Harlow had been displaced by Blitz bombings, or came from impoverished London slums. A sense of community, place and belonging, as well as the modern conveniences of a real home and personal space offered in the new town, is suggested in this panel's first person excerpt:

The joy of having a house at last. It had a bathroom, inside toilet, and it had a back boiler to the solid fuel fire which provided us with *hot water* on tap! We were surrounded by green grass and trees and you couldn't smell the Kensal Green gasworks. I even had my own front door and a garden where I could grow things, if I could learn how! My son could actually play in the garden. The day we moved in he couldn't wait to go to bed in his own room in a proper bed!

From the new town's earliest beginnings, then, residents felt a sense of comfort and place. As their old pasts, their old family histories of living in London were left behind, they became rooted in a new place, but one that was also connected to a very old heritage through the presence of the old town.

"I think a sense of place, of the town, is one of the major things that we're trying to do," Claire Hooper explains. The Museum of Harlow is, after all, foremost focused on its mandate to tell the story of Harlow. The museum is for Harlow, exclusively about Harlow; all objects and stories represented in the museum relate in some way to the story and development of the town and life within it, whether old town or new town. Stevenage, another

new town in nearby Hertfordshire, also has a local history museum. Even though new towns were planned and built for the same purposes, under the same ideological and social conditions, according to Chris Lydamore, the Museum of Harlow tells an entirely different story than Stevenage's museum:

They're very different from us, even though they're only thirty miles away, and the community is the same age. It's how the community perceives itself, and how that is reflected through the museum. And that's the wonderful thing about the local museum. You have these regional nuances and variations played out, which helps then bolster that sense of place.

### Memory, the Museum and Mediating Place

Two middle-aged men look through the 8 x 10 black and white photographs within the file cabinets of the archives. The archive is considered an accessible collection at the museum, and visitors are free to open the photo drawers that have old aerial and road shots of most of the streets and houses around the town. "Those houses, that's where Ruth's cousin Sheila lived," says one man. "About second or third one in." The other reminiscences, "I used to come through there ... when was that? '73? It's not changed." A cup and saucer from the Women's Institute, an old Kodak camera, a green vintage hair dryer sit behind cabinet glass (Fig. 5). Memory emerges from objects and images like these at the museum and lends further meanings of place for the local visitor.

The last section of gallery four focuses on the more recent past. Within each cluster of objects, individual items trigger personal recollections unique to the local visitor. Being full of meaning, the act of viewing directs the visitor toward a conscious sense of home and belonging. As visitors walk through the Museum of Harlow, memory and place are woven together. The museum objects become triggers for varied memories, but many define or reaffirm a sense of place. As Gaynor Kavanagh suggests, histories and memories meet in the collections and within the museum encounter (2005: 1). The fabric and form of the objects in the collection and how the objects serve to illustrate the larger narrative of the town's development are important considerations, but the objects displayed in these exhibits can be analyzed for the memories within them. In many ways, the objects themselves are insignificant; their value lies in the memorial and emotional reaction they elicit. As Kavanagh maintains, "when people

**Fig. 5**  
*Some of the ordinary items on display at the Museum of Harlow: A girl's hair dryer and a bedside clock. Author photo.*



visit museums, they can do no other but bring their life histories and memories with them. . . . Personal memories may be stirred by the images, objects or words made visible and may dominate over any ‘formal’ history offered” (2).

At the Museum of Harlow, the idea of displaying objects that evoke memories is a conscious curatorial consideration. Chris notes that the museum has many objects in storage, and that many objects relating to a modern era could have been chosen for display, but some objects “wouldn’t have meant anything to people. So we really decided to specifically choose things that people could relate to and understand.” The museum narrative is largely carried through general text panels; most objects are only minimally described with brief labels that simply identify the object. Few labels reveal their uses. Occasionally, objects are displayed with a brief story behind their creation, like the early-20th-century handmade doll that was a prize for a town raffle, or the “welcome home” crocheted tea cozy made in anticipation of the arrival of a soldier who never returned. While in some cases little contextual information was known about the objects chosen for display, the fact that many of the objects “stand alone” without descriptions of their usage, creator or relevance to the town, allows the opportunity for visitors to use their own memories to generate their own understandings of, and associations with, the objects. Information beyond what the object itself can speak is avoided, and objects that seem to be unfamiliar to visitors remain behind the scenes in storage.

Objects, instead, are chosen and positioned to imbue memory. The act of remembering is the prioritized or expected reaction for visitors, and the kind of reaction that the staff hopes the objects will provoke. Claire acknowledges that

a sense of place, of the town, is one of the major things that we’re trying to do. We’ve got all of the photographs, and all the bits and pieces around, so that it gives the idea “oh yes, I remember using this part of the town and using that part of the town.” It’s like I was saying before, about a sense of pride and understanding of the town, which will hopefully help people have an ongoing sense of pride in the town, a sense of roots, and where they come from. I would say that’s probably one of the main things that we’re trying to foster is memories. And it works.

A green rotary telephone was an artifact purchased for the museum collection to place in the new town era exhibit case (Fig. 6). The museum doesn’t have funds for a purchasing budget, but Claire scrounged

the money and bought the phone. Referring to curatorial practice, Kavanagh suggests “the self, as much as the ‘professional’ is brought to this and cannot be set aside. We are what we create and what we create, in good part, constitutes ourselves” (2005: 3). In this particular instance, Claire’s own memories of Harlow are reflected in her choice of an object to display, as the green rotary telephone evokes memories that define meanings of place for Claire, who was raised in Harlow. When she was positioning the phone in the display case, she picked up the receiver and the phone made a “ding” sound. “I suddenly remembered my granddad’s phone number from when I was about six,” she explained. The rotary telephone prompted a memory associated with home, and Claire says the telephone often triggers conversations and recollections from people about past days of living in Harlow.

Much of the collection on display at the end of gallery four is everyday objects of a recent past. Because they are unremarkable, they can elicit responses based in memory rather than wonder or curiosity in their form, material or use (such as in the Roman and Medieval exhibits). A baby pram symbolizes Harlow New Town’s early moniker as “pram town,” because of its booming baby population; collectible cigarette sports cards, a plastic bridal doll, commemorative Queen Elizabeth II tins, and even a circa-2000 cellphone are all on display. These commonplace items allow opportunity for memory and nostalgia to be elicited, their familiarity evoking associations of daily life in the town. Many visitors may have, or certainly have had, some of these items in their homes. The presence of these in the visitor’s life experience—now legitimized as history in the museum—places them

**Fig. 6**  
This green rotary telephone was one of few objects purchased by the museum for the new town exhibit. For Claire Hooper, the museum’s Education Officer, the telephone triggered a memory of her grandfather.



within the larger story of Harlow, and evokes a sense of belonging. The objects and the memories and connections that they trigger help convey the idea that, as Claire summarizes, “you’re as involved in the creation of the next stage of the town as much as anybody else, and that it’s your town ...”

David Devine describes how visitors react to the everyday objects on display: “when they look around they read the text on the panels, but then they look at the artifacts in the galleries and they say ‘oh yes, I had one of those.’” David related a recent encounter with a visitor who suddenly realized that “I’m part of the history of Harlow. I’ve got one of those phones in the cabinet.” Visitors, then, are coming away from the museum with a connection to the collection and a feeling of belonging within the story and community of Harlow. “You just don’t get that same interplay in the earlier galleries, because [they’re] outside people’s immediate knowledge zone,” Chris remarks, continuing:

So, the new town collections are really the most important things that we have. ... If you look at what the community actually needs, it’s the 20th century and new town collections, because they are the things that give the town a sense of place.

Certain objects in the collection can be recognized as important in triggering specific memories of community and feelings of place for local visitors. The Prince Charles and Lady Diana 1981 commemorative wedding plate, with a classic engagement portrait of Charles and “shy Di” in blue, is described in a particular way to imbue a certain meaning (Fig. 7). The label reads “The wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 was marked with street parties and sports matches

throughout Harlow.” The plate is labelled in a way that uses the object to trigger a remembrance of how the event impacted Harlow. A local visitor who witnessed the wedding is prompted to remember the street party, and think about Harlow through a celebratory lens, where community get-togethers are a common and important part of the town, and how as a member of the Harlow community she fits within those expressions of neighbourhood unity. These kinds of memories can be important constructions in how a visitor thinks about Harlow as a place—a place where community celebrations are important and where residents are able to bond together in public unity as neighbours and friends.

Other common local objects like bus and train tickets, a *Suddenly its Netteswell* record produced by a local school, a swimming pool badge, seventies-style clothing patterns and programs from the Harlow Football Club matches remind visitors of growing up in Harlow, of raising a family, going to school and taking part in town recreation. These presumably positive memories merge together to form a sense of Harlow as a place. One local visitor reminisces to her children, “I remember your Gran using patterns like that,” linking the seventies clothing patterns with memories of family in Harlow.

Memories stirred by the images or objects displayed are often “compared and discussed, ... on a cross-generational basis with a family group” (Kavanagh 2005: 2). Many phrases like “I remember when ...” and “I once had one like that” are conveyed on a generational level, where children become recipients of their parents’ or grandparents’ memories of living in Harlow. One conversation exchanged between a father and his young daughter over the green rotary telephone captures this sort of cross-generational memory dialogue.

Daughter: Dad, when were you born?

Father: 1967

Daughter: Dad, what’s that? Did you have a phone like that?

Father: Yes, we did have a phone exactly like that.

Daughter: But how did you dial it? How did you twist it around?

The father then proceeded to explain the workings of a rotary telephone to his child from his experience of using one in his youth. The objects stimulate dialogues that connect the past with the future.

**Fig. 7**  
The Prince of Wales and Lady Diana Spencer’s 1981 commemorative wedding plate, beside a plastic bridal doll and an early 1990s camera. Author photo.





Claire suggests that “memory is the thing that you bring to the collection ... and it gets those conversations going between members of the family.” Like the conversations Chris suggests parents have with their children about youthful experiences in the town triggered by display images of buildings or school memorabilia, these conversations based in memory help the present generation inherit a sense of place from the older generation. In inheriting their parent’s memories of the past, children construct their own sense of place. Memories of the visit to the museum will also be added to the memories of Harlow told by their parents or grandparents, as “memories of the visit will add to the store of memory for most if not all visitors” (Kavanagh 2005: 2).

The museum itself, the objects in the displays, the stories that emerge from the text panels, all contribute to a sense of place that is unified as one town. Memory, then, bridges the old and new town divide. The last display case in the museum focuses on items from Harlow’s recent past—the 1970s onward. There is no old town/new town distinction, but the collection of objects—the green rotary telephone, the Prince Charles and Lady Di wedding plate, the pocket camera, the clothing patterns—are everyday objects that people living in both Old Harlow and Harlow New Town can remember having owned and used in their daily lives in Harlow. While the story and objects of ancient and Old Harlow leave out newcomers, and while the story of moving to a new town leaves out the long-established, these memories are for everyone to share. Through the process of memory making, a cohesive community is shaped, so that the last text panel title aptly reads “Our Home in Harlow.” The town is one town, one heritage, one shared memory.

## Conclusion

At the Museum of Harlow, history is more than the representation of time. It is also linked to the particularity of place. As a local history museum, the Museum of Harlow serves as the “community’s attic” (Kyrig 2007: 2), wherein local memories, histories, stories and objects are held and displayed as illustrations and validations of a particular community’s purpose and distinctiveness of place. History, objects, memory and landscape intersect at the Museum of Harlow toward the creation of a conscious sense of place. Museum images reflect distinctive features of landscape—both historical

and contemporary—that help affirm sense of place. The new town exhibit relates a narrative rooted in daily living in Harlow, so that a sense of place is fostered through historical narratives that include the visitor. The collection of everyday artifacts function as memory stimuli, linking memory and place together through objects ordinary to Harlow residents, and generational exchanges which invigorate a sense of place through inheritance.

This paper, then, has explored specific themes arising at the Museum of Harlow: community, sense of place, memory and the intersection of memory and place. It suggests that at the Museum of Harlow, objects, photographs, narratives and the acts of remembering work to link history, landscape and people in a unified understanding of local place-identity for a town that has a disjointed or divided past, a disjointed or divided identity. Indeed, the idea of what it means to live in Harlow—this spatially and conceptually divided place of old and new—pervades museum representations and staff perspectives, so that the end of the galleries joins Old Harlow and Harlow New Town together as an “established Essex community.” The contrasting experiences of being a “newcomer” and being “long established” are reconciled.

The Museum of Harlow, finally, is a mediating space, taking two very different places both architecturally and historically, two very different experiences of landscape, and fixing them together as one conceptual place. Visitor’s chronological progression through the museum—beginning with the distant past, and moving through time to the ordinary, the recognizable, the familiar, works to gradually build the visitor’s sense of place, to ultimately realize the Harlow of the distant past and the drastically altered Harlow of the 20th century as one place. In the end, the town is brought together in visitor’s minds, and the trajectory of local history—fragmented in 1947 with the development of the new town—is made cohesive. Through local resident’s experience of visiting the museum, a sense of place and belonging that incorporates new town and old town is reinforced. “Harlow” is revealed as its own distinct place, unique from other new towns like Stevenage. As the Museum *of Harlow*, the museum breaks down any notion that Harlow is only a landscape of ubiquitous, modern, concrete buildings or that Old Harlow is ancillary to the new town. Both old and new are given significance; both spaces are drawn together as one place.

## Notes

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1. See Powell (1983: 131-49).
2. "High Street" is an English term for the primary shopping or commercial street of a town or city. The High Street area of Old Harlow was revitalized during new town construction.
3. See Powell (1983: 149-58).
4. It should be noted that Frederic J. Osborn wrote the first part of the 1977 *New Towns: Their Origins, Achievements and Progress*, while Arnold Whittick authored the second part of the book.
5. See Harlow Council 2008, *Harlow Population Profile* at [http://www.harlow.gov.uk/about\\_the\\_council/council\\_services/growth\\_and\\_regeneration/key\\_statistics\\_and\\_data/harlow\\_population\\_profile.aspx](http://www.harlow.gov.uk/about_the_council/council_services/growth_and_regeneration/key_statistics_and_data/harlow_population_profile.aspx) (accessed February 8, 2012).

6. See <http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/england/essex/harlow> for a guide to listed buildings in Harlow (accessed February 8, 2012).
7. Mark Hall was a principal manor in the Harlow area. The great house was destroyed by fire in 1947. Most of the land developed for the new town belonged to this estate.
8. Previous to 1999, the "Museum of Harlow" was called the "Harlow Museum."
9. See the Museum of Harlow's website: <http://www.harlow.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=7116> (accessed February 8, 2012).
10. All quotations in this paper attributed to Devine, Hooper and Lydamore were relayed during personal interviews on July 30, 2009. The museum tour with Chris and Claire was a few days later in early August 2009.
11. Emphasis is David Devine's.
12. The museum received a small grant from the Essex County Council in 2007 to carry out this project.

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