Anti-slavery Parliamentarian portrait purchase

Runnymede Borough Council has agreed to release thousands of pounds to help buy a "significantly important" oil painting for its museum. The painting is an oil on canvas portrait of Britain's first foreign secretary and one-time leader of the Whig Party, Charles James Fox MP.

Mr Fox, who spent his final years in St Ann's Hill, Chertsey, was a strong supporter of parliamentary reform and advocated for religious tolerance and individual liberty. He was a particularly vocal campaigner for the abolition of slavery and introduced what was to become the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act which made it illegal for British ships and British subjects to trade in enslaved people.

The portrait has been offered to the museum for £5,000 and half of the money for its purchase will come from donations, with the rest from the council's museum after Runnymede Borough Council's corporate management committee signed off the move.

Emma Warren, curator of Chertsey Museum, told the Thursday June 19 meeting: "We've been given the opportunity to purchase an original oil painting, quite a large item, of one of the borough's, if not the country's, unsung heroes." She said the money would come from the museum's own fund which had been "built up over many many years and can only be used for the benefit of the museum's collections."

"In my time at Chertsey Museum, which is 23 years, we've only used the purchase fund four times which is why it's healthy. It's normally kept for items of significant importance which I believe this painting to be, given we only have a couple of portraits of Fox and no original artworks. I could talk literally for hours about him. He is important not just to Chertsey where he spent his final years living on St Anne's Hill. Normally I mention his debauched young life with the women and gambling but I was told to skip over that and concentrate on the important bit as to why he was our unsung hero."

Reports presented to the meeting said Mr Fox, who was known as the Man of the People, first came to Chertsey in 1783 when Elizabeth Armistead, who would become his wife, invited him to join her at her home in St Ann's Hill. The museum's collection features letters from Mr Fox and gives an insight into his life on the hill. He was said to have taken up sheep rearing and learned about planting requirements for crops.

Mrs Warren added: "He was a Whig politician, had an unwavering support for liberty and parliamentary reforms and anti-slavery principles. Many of his views were quite ahead of his time. He spoke out at length against anti-government overreach."

The image produced here is NOT the one the subject of this report.

Image: Joshua Reynolds portrait of Charles James Fox-pl.pinterest.com, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=48763729 This is not likely to be the portrait that is the subject of this article. We have been waiting for details from the museum.

Netflix to mainstream in Surrey

A Surrey film studio used by Netflix, the streaming giant behind hit shows such as Stranger Things, Bridgerton and Adolescence, will be made permanent after full planning permission was granted. The site was originally approved on a short-term basis because of its green belt location, and Runnymede Borough Council's desire to see the area eventually become an office hub as part of its Longcross Garden Village plan. The cratering demand of office space, plus the growing rise of Netflix, saw the land be taken out of green belt – meaning the temporary restrictions no longer applied and its long-term future could be secured. Officers told the Wednesday June 25 meeting: "This building was erected in 2020 under a temporary permission and has been used continually since. Permission was granted originally for the building on a temporary basis for reasons of visual amenity and so as not to prejudice the ongoing phased redevelopment of the Longcross north site. Since then there has been a change in site circumstances in respect of the commercial redevelopment of the site. The building supports the existing studio use and therefore there are no reasons why the building can not remain on a permanent basis."

The site was previously occupied by the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) with many of its old buildings used by Netflix as film studios including buildings within the Surrey Heath. The Longcross North site together with the former DERA land south of the M3 including Longcross Barracks, form the designated Longcross Garden Village and has been removed from the green belt through the 2030 Local Plan. The building is near to the northern boundary within the wider Longcross North site. The officer added: "The appearance of the building is appropriate in the context of the wider film studios site." The application was

unanimously approved.

Longcross Studios (image Google)

Victory for parent power after axed bus route is replaced

Campaigning parents whose children were told to bring torches and walk across unlit heathland by Surrey County Council have won a long-fought victory after it was announced that axed school buses would be replaced. Early this year Surrey County Council said it was saving money and cancelling the free bus service between Molesey and Esher High, advising children to instead walk through dark alleyways, unlit heathland and unguarded viaduct sluice gates. The council's decision was made after bureaucrats decided the route was safe and that there would be no alternative provisions put on, to the horror of worried parents.

Now after months of campaigning, petitions and pressure from senior politicians to stop the 'cruel and needless punishment of children', the council has announced Falcon will trial an extra, paid for, 814 service from Molesey to Esher. Parents, though welcoming the news, are asking why the extra service could not have been announced at the same time, saving needless stress and worry, and why it took the community to fight back to make it happen?

Parent Kate Maxwell said: "This whole process has been so stressful on everyone involved, the parents, children, and schools, and for what? I'm thrilled they've seen sense but it could have been handled so much differently. They would have known it would cause a lot of problems for everyone, including the children already using paid buses. Surely, if they wanted, they could have put these arrangements in place when they axed the free buses instead of wasting everyone's time. Why did it take the community fighting back to make this happen?"

In a letter to parents, Esher High School headteacher Andy King said they were pleased to share that an additional 814 bus would be running as a trial from September, following "strong and sustained advocacy from our school and parent community." It added: "This outcome is the result of collective determination. When 81 of our students lost access to free coach transport, we were placed in a deeply challenging position – one we strongly opposed. But thanks to the powerful, united voice of our parents, carers, staff, governors and supporters, a positive step has now been taken. We want to thank everyone who spoke up, wrote in, and stood with us. Your efforts made the difference. While we regret that such a campaign was necessary, we are relieved that this decision has finally been confirmed. This will support our students getting to school safely, reliably, and ready to learn. At Esher C of E High School, we remain committed to doing what's right for our students – and this is an example of what we can achieve together."

MP for Esher and Walton, Monica Harding, has held meetings with the school and written to the council over the matter. She described it as a win for school children who were facing walks of up to three miles across unlit heathland with concerns about safety, after Surrey County Council decided to withdraw the Esher High School bus service. The MP added: "It's a shame this decision took so long, causing so much uncertainty and stress for parents. Surrey must ensure that its policy making is joined up and reflects the lived experience of our children – I'm glad that this time local families have been heard. We now need to know that this much needed bus provision will be sustained over the longer term."

Following Falcon's decision to introduce an additional bus service to transport pupils to and from Esher High School, there will now be four buses on the 814 route. The extra service will initially run as a trial for the first half-term of the 2025/26 academic year with its use monitored before a decision is made on whether it is needed on a longer-term basis.

Matt Furniss, Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Economic Growth at Surrey County Council, said, "We're very aware of the challenges raised by parents and carers and have worked with Falcon to address these. As with all bus services, we need to ensure they are used to make them viable, so I encourage parents and carers to take up this new provision. This additional bus is being provided by Falcon at no cost to Surrey County Council."

Image: Esher CofE High School headteacher Andy King (Image Google and Esher High)

Surrey house of distinction gets £200K to repair

One of the great Surrey buildings will have another £200,000 of repair work after its owners said they were "morally obligated" to maintain the special 19th century site. Pippbrook House is a Grade II* listed building, 'a distinction' English Heritage only bestows on about 5 per cent of all listed properties. The decision to increase the repair budget from £1.4m to £1.6m was made by Mole Valley District Council's cabinet on Tuesday, June 17, so that parts of the building that were damaged by a historic leak in October 2023 can be fixed – and to make it easier to finish the roof repairs.

Councillor Nick Wright, cabinet member for leisure and community assets, said the council had a 'moral obligation" to repair the famous Dorking building. He added: "It is very much a valued local asset. We do need to find other creative ways of funding some of the work that needs to be done, but you can't do that if you've got holes in your roof. We're not denying that there are challenges there, there are significant challenges…but these works are necessary."

In February 2023, the council originally approved a budget of £3.1m for works required to fix Pippbrook House – with £1.6m coming from Mole Valley and the rest obtained through grants. Unfortunately for the council, it was unable to bring in any external cash, limiting the overall scale of what could be achieved. This caused the council to change course and in November 2023 £1.4m was released to begin necessary work to weatherproof Pippbrook House.

The new work will also open up two rooms that cannot be used due to ceiling damage, the meeting heard, matching one of the council's objectives of bringing Pippbrook back into use. Pippbrook House was built between 1856 and 1858 and designed by the architect behind Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras station, George Gilbert Scott. Cllr Gary Sevenoaks, who chairs the council's scrutiny committee, said questions needed to be asked as to why the council was unable to secure a grant for the remaining £1.5m needed to fully repair the building.

Pippbrook House (image Google)

Gatwick Diamond authority denied

Merging Reigate and Banstead Borough Council with its neighbour Crawley has been ruled out – in a decision that has left drivers behind the move "disappointed" with the Government. This week leaders from the 11 boroughs and districts, together with the county council, were told the Government planned to survey residents over merging into either two or three mega councils.

The council was told it would not be allowed to move forward with its preferred option because it had also backed the creation of three unitaries – and the rules stated councils could only support one idea, and they had to cover all of Surrey. The government also said the plan lacked enough detail on cost savings. They had wanted to form, at £13 billion plus, the largest economy in the sub-region, and to be conjoined by the world's busiest single runway airport in Gatwick.

The news was relayed to the councils by the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution, Jim McMahon. He said: "I understand this will be disappointing; however, this consultation process allows for consultees to comment on whether the Secretary of State should implement one or other of the two proposals received, including the proposal co-signed by Reigate and Banstead Borough Council. If, in the future, there remains an interest in changing the boundary between Surrey and West Sussex, there are other mechanisms for doing so and this process does not prevent that. I also note your desire for the Gatwick Diamond economic area to be within the area of one Strategic Authority so as to best provide for economic growth. I want to make clear that the decision not to include your proposal in the consultation does not preempt devolution options for the wider area, including establishing or expanding a Strategic Authority that includes all councils making up the Gatwick Diamond."

Leader of Reigate and Banstead Borough Council, Councillor Richard Biggs said: "We are disappointed that the Government will not be including our joint proposal with Crawley within the consultation. I am pleased that we took the opportunity to highlight to Government the important contribution that our combined area makes to the national economy, as well as its economic growth potential. While we accept the Government's decision, we will continue to advocate for joined up economic and infrastructure planning and investment across both authorities. In terms of local government reorganisation, we are now focused on trying to secure the best available model of local government in Surrey – which we continue to strongly believe is three unitary councils. A three unitary model in Surrey will achieve the best balance of delivering value for money for our residents whilst maintaining strong local connections and identities and delivering high-quality service."

Chris Caulfield

Epsom and Ewell Times adds:

The **Gatwick Diamond** is a term used to describe a key economic area in the South East of England, centred around **Gatwick Airport**. It includes parts of **Surrey and West Sussex**, notably towns such as **Crawley, Reigate, Redhill, Horsham, and Haywards Heath**.

Key features of the Gatwick Diamond:

- **Economic significance**: It is one of the UK's most dynamic business regions, home to over **45,000 businesses** and supporting around **500,000 jobs**.
- **Transport hub**: Gatwick Airport, one of the UK's busiest international airports, makes the area a major transport and logistics hub.
- Sectors: It hosts a mix of industries, including aviation, engineering, financial services, professional services, and advanced manufacturing.
- Strategic location: Situated between London and the South Coast, with excellent rail, road, and air links.

Purpose of the name:

The term is used by **local authorities, business partnerships, and regional planners** to promote regional cooperation, attract investment, and plan infrastructure in a way that supports sustainable economic growth. The **Gatwick Diamond Initiative** is a public-private partnership that actively markets the region for inward investment.

So, when Reigate and Banstead refer to the "Gatwick Diamond economic area", they are aligning with this identity and economic cluster, arguing that the area's interests may be best served by a unified strategic authority.

Additional reporting - Sam Jones.

Gatwick Airport (Credit Gatwick Airport)

Surrey jail addresses prison population crisis

Sixty six temporary prisoner cells, built at HMP Coldingley during the Covid-19 pandemic, will be made permanent in an effort to "ease" the crisis facing the service. Nationally, the prison population has doubled in the past 30 years while only 500 new cells have been built in the past 14 years. It has left the service scrambling around looking for a series of short-term ways to increase capacity until four new prisons come online by 2031, creating 14,000 extra spaces.

The latest stop gap has been the approval of 66 cells in HMP Coldingley in Bisley by Surrey Heath Borough Council on Thursday, June 6. The cells were approved unanimously during a brief two-minute item with no questions or debate from members. Case officers addressing the meeting said: "No objections have been raised by any statutory consultees, while there is a national need for prisoner accommodation. The application is therefore recommended for approval."

The plans were reported to committee due to its size – although details were scant on the advice of the Ministry of Justice, which said the application contained officially sensitive information, including the layout. The confidential information has not been shared in the public domain however the publicly available aspects of the report said the overall site comprises a variety of buildings of up to four storeys in height, predominantly concentrated towards the north-western flank and centre. Among them are a central accommodation block, an engineering workshop and a laundry building. Sports pitches and open spaces are at the south-west with the prison entrance at the north-eastern corner of the site. The entire perimeter of the category C site, that is male prisoners who cannot be trusted in open conditions, is secured by a 5.2-metre-high security fence.

The report read: "The proposed development supports a demonstrable national infrastructure need and aligns with national and local policy objectives." It added: "The installation of the cells was considered necessary in the event of a national emergency to allow for safeguarding procedures to be implemented during COVID-19. There is also an on-going national shortfall of prison spaces, with the prison population having roughly doubled in the last 30 years with only 500 places added to the country's stock of jail cells in the last 14 years. At national level four prisons are being built as part of the Plan for Change to create 14,000 extra spaces by 2031 to assist with the crisis. Until then, however, short term measures such the installation of Rapid Deployment Cells,

and the retention of the temporary accommodation installed during the pandemic such as this site, help to ease the burden of rising demand."

The application is supported by comment from the Department of Justice (see confidential paper). "There is a clear need for existing prison sites to support the increased demand and shortage of supply of prison places across the country. The proposed development therefore helps to support a demonstrable national need."

Related reports:

Surrey prison failed IPP prisoner

HMP Coldingley (image Google)

9 year process finalised for 1200 Surrey homes

The final planning application of the 1,200-home Deepcut regeneration project has been approved. The massive housing project was given the initial green light back in 2014 when Surrey Heath Borough Council agreed the site was suitable for the major residential development. Now, nine years later, the final reserved matter has been signed off, with members at the Thursday, June 5, planning committee bursting into spontaneous applause in celebration of the milestone.

The former Princess Royal Barracks covers 114 hectares. What was once a military site has been slowly transformed into 1,200 homes, public open spaces, community buildings, a primary school and new retail and commercial opportunities. The decade-long project was divided into three housing phases, and three non-residential ones. All had been agreed with the exception of last Thursday's.

Councillors unanimously approved Weston Homes' bid to transform the redundant security hut and Sergeants, together with car parking, into 37 new homes, of which five will be marketed as affordable. Planning officer Sarita Bishop told the meeting, in between the cheers: "Members, I am delighted to bring this application to you this evening. It is the last reserved matter on Deepcut. We have finally got there. This is phase 4H, and unlike the rest of the scenes that we've looked at, this is actually quite separate to the main Deepcut site."

The process has moved slowly but surely towards the finish line as the different stages got approved. In August last year, the council signed off on a new sports pavilion as part of the final application for infrastructure, to sit alongside the sports hub and play area. More recently, in November 2024, a care home that will act as a gateway to the development was granted permission.

Image: Final reserved matters approved for Deepcut (Surrey Heath)

Farnham Museum repairs hitting £2M

The cost of repairing "one of the most important buildings in Surrey" has ballooned to nearly £2 million after further setbacks were discovered - with Waverley Borough Council now on the hook for about three quarters of a million pounds.

The Grade 1 listed Farnham Museum has been protected due to the exceptional interest in its rare design. Its listing places it alongside some of the nation's most famous landmarks including Buckingham Palace, Hampton Court and the Cenotaph.

In March 2023, funding for the project was secured after the Arts Council gave Waverley Borough Council a grant of £734,335 for essential repairs to its Wilmer House, Georgian home, in West Street.

The council-owned building had fallen into disrepair with the cash used to address decaying brickwork, its collapsing second floor window arches, and deeply eroded mortar joints.

Further exploratory work uncovered a wrath on additional problems with the budget growing ever since. Senior councillors has described the work as vital to protecting the "extremely valuable building" and that describing its worth in monetary terms "felt a little grubby".

Following the Tuesday, June 3, meeting of Waverley Borough Council, which agreed to set aside an additional £243,000 for the project, the total cost is expected to be £1,720,000 – of which £735,000 will be funded by the council.

Councillor Kika Mirylees, portfolio holder for community services and leisure said: "Wilmer House is a grade one listed building and is extremely rare being one of fewer than 20 buildings of its type..

"As a grade one listed building it sits alongside other somewhat more famous buildings such as Buckingham Palace, Hampton Court, the Tower of London and the Cenotaph. However, as we know, the challenges that come with a grade 1 listed building are not easy."

She added: "The first phase was always going to be one of uncertainty, we knew that, until the scaffolding came down and we saw what was lying behind it. The extra funding we need will be for the parapet wall and the two chimneys, which will make up the majority of the extra funding because we can not leave them as they are.

"Their deterioration is much greater than expected and they were not part of the tendered contract. "Like it or not Waverley has a statutory obligation to carry out the repair work in a timely manner due to planning law and health and safety concerns – and the funding given to us by the Arts Council."

It is expected that the work will take about 18 weeks to complete and will be finished by mid October, the meeting heard. Any delay would have a knock on effect and push the project into the next year, resulting in a third consecutive winter shut down and costing a further £69,000.

Cllr Mark Merryweather, portfolio holder for finance, assets and property added: "When you go up there and have an expert explain to you the history of the building, the skill that went into the original works there, it almost feels slightly grubby to start monetising it, because it is an extremely valuable building.

"But having said that we have to, we are a council, we have a responsibility – not only to our taxpayers, but to Farnham and the borough, and to the nation because this is a nationally important building.

"In our stewardship and custody I am confidant its going to be looked after the way it should. Its disappointing we've found more work that needs to be doing but no one can say we weren't fully aware of the risk."

Museum of Farnham JT initials (Image Google)

Another Surrey borough heading for bankruptcy?

Surrey Heath Borough Council's desperation to fight off bankruptcy crystallised further after it agreed to sell a car park and land in order "to keep the lights on". The council has to make huge cuts this year to balance its budget after long-delayed audits revealed millions of pounds was missing from its balance sheet. This included more than £8m wiped off its reserves effectively overnight and the downgrading in value of its major assets bought as part of a £100m regeneration project.

On Tuesday, May 21, the council agreed to sell Woodend Road car park in Deepcut and land on London Road in Camberley to begin to claw back desperately needed cash. Failure to balance its books would result in the loss of support given to the community through things such as meals on wheels type services, funding for Citizens Advice Bureau, children's play parks, and other non-statutory provisions. It comes as the council must shed £1.74m this year through savings, reduced interest payments and a further £500,000 from "service delivery reviews". The purpose of any potential disposal of land, the meeting heard, is to bring in money for a council "in financial distress and we cannot incur further related costs".

Shaun Macdonald, leader of Surrey Heath Borough Council, said: "Car park, play parks, discretionary services, the support we give to the local community will go in the blink of an eye, so yes these are tough decisions but these were the tough decisions we were elected to make in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Two to four play parks can be renovated (instead) for young people to enjoy for the next 15 years. How many young people will benefit from that? Citizen's Advice Bureau funding, it can also support, potentially the provision of meals in people's homes."

These are the first tranche of sales the council is deciding on. Decisions made are being based on what the council considers is best for the entire borough, rather than the specific area affected. Car parking in Surrey Heath is particularly vulnerable as, by law, it does not need to be provided – and any council that declares itself bankrupt cannot spend money on discretionary services that do not pay for themselves. Parking in Surrey Heath loses money.

The London Road land sale, described as a "small plot", is said to have no value financially to the council but incurs unnecessary costs. Cllr Murray Rowlands (Labour: St Michaels) said it had been "blighted with fly-tipping and parking" and was "a serious problem that affects the whole of that part of Camberley." Cllr Macdonald added that it was "a fly tippers' paradise."

The Deepcut car park sale proved more divisive, and not just among the opposition members who were calling for the sale to be halted on the grounds that it would deprive the area of much needed parking spaces. Deepcut is undergoing a massive transformation with the former military barracks being turned into a huge redevelopment.

Cllr Cliff Betton (Liberal Democrats: Mytchett and Deepcut) said: "I fully understand the need for the council to raise funds from the sale of assets surplus to requirements. We have to have a balanced budget at least until the time the new unitary authority comes into being. After that, Surrey Heath Borough Council will cease to exist and it will be up to others to make decisions for the people of Deepcut. Everyone knows there are plans approved for Deepcut and it's now renamed Mindenhurst; 1,200 homes are being built, some are already completed and there are still another 800 still to come. Parking for the old Deepcut village pre-Mindenhurst was ok, it worked, sometimes a bit crowded but the car park was well used. But this will see just eight car park space increases in a village with 800 new homes, a ratio that doesn't even meet Surrey County Council's standards. If we want to build a better future for Deepcut, and Mindenhurst is part of that, we cannot build in parking blight from the outset. Woodend Road needs to stay as a car park."

Cllr Kel Finan-Cooke, property and economic development portfolio holder said: "We would prefer to not have to make decisions like this. We would prefer to not be in a position where we are need to achieve capital receipts to keep the lights on at Surrey Heath for the next two years but that's the situation we are in. We don't want to have to consider the sale of lands but we absolutely must."

Woodend Road Car Park in Deepcut (image Google)

Strikes could still impact half-term Gatwick flights

Gatwick Airport's largest carrier EasyJet is expecting to run its full schedule during the busy half term period despite industrial action taking place by their oil refuellers. Strike action by baggage handlers, which would have run at the same time, was suspended to allow Unite members to vote on new terms - lessening any potential disruptions.

More than 100 Red Handling workers at Gatwick Airport including baggage handling, check-in and flight dispatchers had been set to walk out over what they said were late and missing pension payments – but this has been put on hold for at least a fortnight after the union Unite received proof pension contributions had been paid. Staff at Redline Oil which fuels easyJet, Air India, Uganda Airlines, will continue taking action between Friday May 23 and Tuesday May 27 after unanimously rejecting the company's pay offer.

A London Gatwick spokesperson said: "We are aware of the proposed industrial action from Redline Oil and are working closely with them and our airlines to minimise impacts to passengers. Passengers should contact their airline directly for more information."

A spokesperson at RED Handling UK said: "We welcome Unite's decision to postpone industrial action for two weeks pending a final ballot. We are pleased to have responded positively and fully to all historical issues raised, resolving every point quickly and collaboratively. We will continue to work with Unite the Union to work towards a solution to ending the dispute. Throughout the process, we have been honest and transparent with the Union and all of our staff, keeping them fully up-to-date with progress and timescales. We committed to supporting them and have put systems in place to ensure a proactive and open dialogue with our teams in the future. We are hugely grateful for the support of the team and for their commitment and positivity, which has helped us to achieve our best performing 'on time performance' for the period in company's history."

Unite has said Red Handling also agreed to cover the loss of interest on any contributions not paid and an independent audit carried out to ensure missing pensions contributions does not happen again. Regional officer Ben Davis said: "Red Handling has returned to negotiations and made an improved offer and therefore Unite has suspended strike action to allow members to be balloted on the proposals."

The remaining day of strike action by baggage handlers on June 1 is still due to go ahead pending the outcome of the ballot.

Gatwick Airport (image Gatwick)