

# Friends of The Auckland Project Newsletter

Autumn 2025





## Dear Friends,

This issue of our newsletter has a distinct focus on conservation and care, from looking after delicate models and paintings to finding new use for historic gardens and buildings. I hope you enjoy hearing from colleagues about their work, and knowing that your support as Friends helps us undertake these projects.

I know lots of Friends have attended the season of fascinating free talks at the Spanish Gallery, so kindly supported by the Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica. Do book soon for the last screening this season, 'Patinir, the invention of landscape painting' on November 19th, with an talk by Richard Jacques.

We have our Christmas gathering planned for December 16th where Beth and Lydia, who feature in this edition, will introduce the Neapolitan nativity scene and answer questions. Jonathan and I will be on hand with seasonal drinks and treats in the Library and we look forward to seeing you all!

Jane Ruffer



Francisco de  
Zurbarán 1598-1664  
Jacob (caption to  
confirm)

Zurbarán's portrayals of Jacob and his sons, founders of the Tribes of Israel, no doubt provoked some heated discussions around Bishop Trevor's dining table when they arrived. Having kept a constant vigil for 250 years as bishops came and went and the palace grew quiet, they inspired the creation of the Auckland Castle Trust, now The Auckland Project. This year it is the turn of Auckland Palace's quiet sentinels to take centre stage.



Above, left to right: (captions to confirm)

Regular visitors might have noticed that the Long Dining Room is watched over by rather fewer brothers than usual at the moment. Joseph and Asher are at the National Gallery where they are being conserved ahead of display next year in the first major monographic show dedicated to Zurbarán in the UK. The exhibition will be the first dedicated display of the artist's paintings at the National Gallery since the full series from Auckland Palace was shown there in 1994.

Cleaning of the paintings and removal of overpaint from previous campaigns of conservation show up the historic repairs to tears in Asher's canvas on the left and damage to Joseph's turban on the right.

Dan and Judah are also being conserved by a leading conservation studio in London. Next year three more paintings from the series will head out for conservation, with a new loan, contemporary to the series, arriving in the Long Dining Room to complement the remaining and returning paintings. Dan and Judah are due to return to Bishop Auckland ready for the re-opening of the visitor attractions in February 2026 following our annual deep clean. Visitors to the Long Dining Room will therefore see a changing array of paintings and will be able to see the visual improvements in the returning works, particularly as they begin to appear alongside those yet to be treated.

The conservation studio is working closely with the National Gallery's conservators to share findings and ensure a consistency of approach to the conservation of the paintings, including the cleaning and removal of historic retouching and the techniques, materials and varnish employed.

We often tend towards explaining the meaning and messages in painting, but there is a great deal that can be learned in their physical condition – how they were painted, and how their condition has been shaped by their care and display. It is a complex area which takes in history, material science, chemistry, digital technology and fine art. We look forward to being able to share the discoveries made during conservation with visitors.





*Dan on the left is much further on in the process than Judah and is nearing completion. Judah has been cleaned and the painstaking process of retouching is underway.*



A detail from Judah's cloak. The cleaning of the paintings has been a complicated process made more difficult by the fusing of the paint and varnish layers in some areas. This is likely because the paintings were relined before the removal of the discoloured varnish and is particularly visible in the light background where yellow staining can be seen. In the darker areas of the cloak in the painting of Judah, not only have areas been overcleaned and over retouched but there has also been a change in the pigments making it difficult to interpret the folds in the cloak before retouching has been carried out in this most recent treatment.

Tacks left in the sides of the paintings show that there have been at least three previous campaigns of conservation including the relining of the paintings. These are visible through x-rays and identifiable through the undulations in the canvases with the paintings out of their frames.





**Auckland Palace's remarkable eighteenth century nativity scene, known in Italian as a presepe, is one of the most impressive and important examples outside Italy. Over 421 individually carved figures bring together classical and Christian mythology with the traditional folk culture of everyday Naples. As the scene is prepared for display this Christmas (from 21st November until the end of the year). Caroline Smith, The Auckland Project's Preventative Conservator, explores the challenges of taking care of such an elaborate scene.**

*Above: Nativity Display in the Faith Museum*

As we prepare for this year's display of the spectacular 18th century Neapolitan presepe or nativity in the Faith Museum, we already looking ahead to the deinstallation of the scene in early 2026. Whilst Christmas fades into memory, behind the scenes we will begin a period of conservation for some of the complex pieces that make up this extravagant exhibit.

On the advent of its third showing in Bishop we are now nearing completion of outline documentation, photography and condition assessments for the 421 individual items – from masonry to Magi – that make up the display.

Photography underway in the fine art store and studio area in Bishop Auckland, October 2025

Extravagant nativity scenes were traditionally displayed in the community of Naples over the Christmas period. Huge attention to detail was given to different aspects of the design and manufacture of these complex creations. Specialists employed ranged from local craftspeople to artists of the royal court including the sculptor Giuseppe Sammartino and his pupils, Salvatore di Franco, Giuseppe Gori, and Angelo Viva, who all contributed to the Auckland Palace nativity.

This multifaceted piece is crafted from a huge variety of material types, from organics such as textiles, paper and cork to inorganics such as terracotta, glass, wood, metal and coral. The complexity of the materials, the specialists and specialisms involved in the creation of the nativity in the late 18th century are reflected by its complicated conservation requirements in the 21st.

Having lived a busy life of likely annual installation and repacking for many years, some of the figures are now showing signs of wear and tear commensurate with age, with evidence of previous conservation having yielded mixed results. Amongst other issues the nativity and its actors show signs of flaking paint, ingrained dirt, fabric damage including brittle and degrading silks and unsatisfactory previous repairs.

It is anticipated that conservation by Accredited conservators will be commissioned in phases concentrating on areas that have underlying structural issues but that will also have the

*Below: Photography underway in the fine art store and studio area in Bishop Auckland, October 2025*  
*Right: (captions to confirm)*



The nativity offers a peek into 18th century life, from taverns, to markets, scenes with household animals and livestock to hunting and the exotic. Outfits, hairstyles and accessories also speak of trade, status and fashion. Coral jewellery for the everyday women, is wrapped up in an Italian tradition of protection from the evil eye and features alongside glittering sequins and pearls for the affluent.

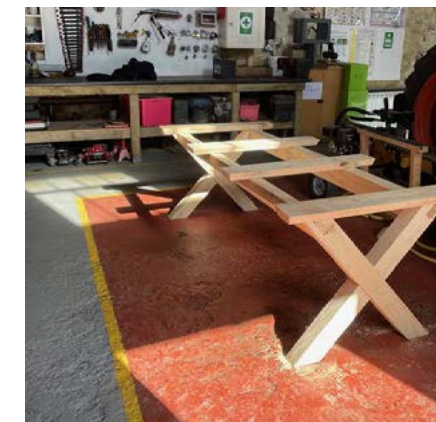
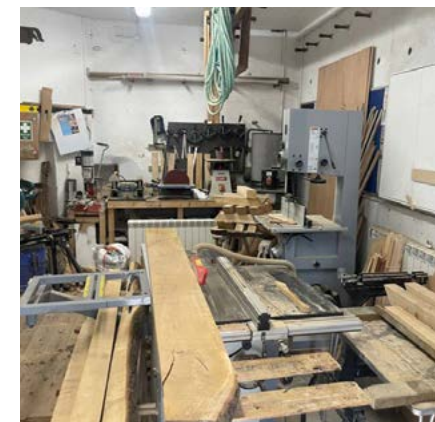
The complex figures are made of coarse natural fibre and wire, their arms and legs are carved of wood, and their shoulders and head are terracotta. Their eighteenth-century costumes are a mix of silks, linen, wool and leather.

greatest aesthetic effect ready for the display of the nativity, safely conserved and looking better than ever in Bishop Auckland for Christmas 2026. It is likely, given the scale and complexity of the nativity, that the whole process will take place over several years.

As we look to secure funding for the conservation process, we will install dedicated donation terminals within the display area allowing members of the public to contribute to the preservation of this fantastic Bishop Auckland treasure, which has fast become a part of many people's Christmas plans.



# Gardens



The West Mural Tower was built as a defensive gatehouse guarding the original main entrance to the Palace when it was home to the Prince Bishops of Durham. Surrounding the restored West Mural Tower a new garden is being developed, with a focus on learning and play. Andy Nesbitt, The Auckland Project's Head Curator of Parks, Gardens & Landscapes, is overseeing the development.

Nestled in the most western end of the curtilage the West Mural Tower Garden has been designed as a multi-use space, adding yet another important part of our jigsaw of gardens. It will be a great asset for schools and community groups, as well as lending itself to commercial opportunities. Of course it will also be the final garden development for visitors to enjoy as part of the palace curtilage.

The garden, albeit small, will

pack a punch. It will host deep herbaceous borders with trained fruit and climbing flowers on the walls, ample seating and a central lawn area for everyone to enjoy. This will include elements of play and a safe space for parents who can relax whilst their children let off some steam.

The Cart Shed will be brought back to its former glory, with a few tweaks so it will lend itself to use by school and community groups and for events. It will

*Above: Workshop progress and West Mural Tower Garden Andy Nesbitt*

have an open sided area with a kitchenette, and two 10-foot oak trestle tables down the centre. These are currently being made by our wonderful volunteers Les and John (known as 'the lads'). The table has been milled from the oak trees that fell in the Deer Park during storm Arwen. Our team stored the trees for uses such as these and it is great to see them start a new life where they will be enjoyed by so many.

The garden is set to be completed, construction-wise, by December. Then it will be over to the gardens team to plant and finish off ready for opening in the Spring. We look forward to showing you around once it is complete.



# Town



**Those exploring Bishop Auckland might have noticed some of the properties around Auckland Palace newly decorated and busy with fresh faces. So far eight historic properties have been sensitively converted into holiday lets for visitors. Sarah Townsend, The Auckland Project's Hospitality and Accommodation Advisor, shares her experience of bringing them back to life.**

*My weakness is falling in love with deserted buildings that should have a story to tell and live a life again...*

I was so fortunate to be asked by Jonathan and Jane Ruffer to consider looking into some lovely but unloved properties that were in the curtilage of Auckland Palace, with a view to making them into suitable holiday lets for visitors to The Auckland Project.

This idea seemed a no-brainer, as our historical venue and the glorious countryside within easy distance of Bishop Auckland would surely make the perfect short break away for discerning visitors.

I jumped at the possibilities as the charming properties had such potential, and home-from-home stays for families with children and dogs are becoming very popular. Their proximity to the heritage sites is unrivalled: The Palace, the Faith Museum, the Mining Art Gallery and the Spanish Gallery are all within walking distance. Also with the restored Walled Garden and new Paradise Garden we are already attracting garden lovers from far and wide.

My first two cottages to turn around were situated either side of the Clock Tower. No. 15, is now called Lightfoot Cottage after

Joseph Lightfoot, who was an English theologian and Bishop of Durham (1828–1889). No. 12 is Palace Garden Cottage as it has an outstanding view of Auckland Palace's Walled Garden from an upstairs bedroom window, and from its own small private cottage garden: a "view for all seasons".

Both properties needed to be given a new life; they were tired. What fun for me! I love colour, and giving warmth to the interiors was my first thought. Do look at the website and you will understand.

Furnishing was going to be a challenge. I had a tight budget, and I didn't want new, sterile, off-the-shelf interiors. So my search began. I asked volunteers and I went rummaging in charity shops and curio shops. I bid online at local auctions with my heart in my mouth for one or two good pieces of classic furniture. How interesting it is that good brown furniture is so cheap these days. Bargains were had. By putting one or two pieces of good furniture in a room, it immediately set the tone and

style I was looking for, and the rest of the furnishings, collected in a random fashion, followed to find their place.

I liken furnishing a room to painting a picture. Art having been my training, I approached it in the same way. I stood back and looked at the room I wanted to decorate, and looked at my palette of pictures, materials, furniture, china, etc, and placed them as my instinct and eye felt was best.

I had received boxes of books, containers of glass, china, cutlery, vases and bric-a-brac. Jane Ruffer sorted her cellar and gifted lamps, toys and many treasures, and Jonathan delivered regularly to my home prints, saucy French posters, cartoons and glorious colourful designs for operatic characters, and a wonderful set of a limited edition of Sarah Churchill's paintings, which are now hanging in No. 16 Market Place, aptly named Churchill Cottage.

A tap on my kitchen window from Jonathan heralded an exciting donation of some fascinating

memorabilia which was to be cleaned and framed to adorn the walls of the cottages. I found offcuts of materials on eBay that one couldn't possibly afford normally. These were scooped up by talented volunteers to be made into bedhead covers and cushions. Volunteers for The Auckland Project were my lifeline, sorting and washing china, cutlery, glass and books that had been donated. This was a mammoth task, but the cottages have a real 'home from home' feel and kitchens you can cook and relax in after a busy day exploring.

I had the challenge of finding a reliable man with a van, and I struck lucky! Shaun became my guy and, along with Ron the decorator, who I bribed with homemade cake, we progressed happily. My newfound local tradesmen and volunteers, now friends, were my lifeline. I felt I was welcomed into the inner world of Bishop Auckland, which would never have happened if I hadn't been this crazy lady given the opportunity to renovate the heritage cottages.



Palace Garden Cottage, No.12  
Market Place  
Bec Hughes



Churchill Cottage, No.16 Market Place  
Bec Hughes



“A step up in smartness, with Le Creuset casserole pots and antique furniture, are... new holiday cottages which opened this spring. I stayed at Lightfoot Cottage, where the front door opens onto the cobbles of the Market Place and the Palace’s Grade I listed gatehouse.”

Sarah Turner, From Coal to Culture: Bishop Auckland’s unlikely renaissance, Financial Times

The Clarence, No.2 Bec Hughes



I couldn't have been happier. Anything was possible with this team and, in fact, it reminded me of a past life working in Italy when my byword was non c'è problema – not a problem.

I must admit there was one day when I felt very disheartened, as I was unable to move in one of the houses after ovens, beds, tables and chairs had all been delivered at once. But a guardian angel named Hazel suddenly arrived on the doorstep with a cleaning kit and told me she'd come to help. I couldn't believe it, and we have since often reminisced about that day. It was a turning point,

and the cottages were soon spick and span and sorted for guests in an organised fashion. They are now cared for by a wonderful team of housekeepers who take enormous pride in looking after such gems.

Flowers in vases, kitchens looking welcoming, polished sinks, new tea towels, curtains up and tweaked, beds made, towels folded – we were nearly done. Weeks of dashing, planning and creating heritage homes for holidays was working. The photographer arrived to capture the new rooms, media coverage followed, journalists were invited,

and hey presto, bookings were being taken for Auckland Palace Stays and guests soon arrived!

I was so fortunate to be asked to restore these glorious properties and give them all a different character. They came alive and are now being enjoyed by happy couples, families, children and dogs visiting the amazing Auckland Palace and the various venues, consequently taking the experience of their story home to spread the word. There is no better advertising than word of mouth.



# Meet the Team



Above:  
Elizabethan  
posy trencher,  
set of eight with  
box, c.1580,  
painted wood.  
Courtesy of the  
Shakespeare  
Birthplace Trust  
(caption to  
confirm)

The good news that Charlotte Grobler, Auckland Palace's Curator, is taking a spell of maternity leave meant Auckland Palace needed temporary cover. Happily, The Auckland Project were able to recruit two individuals into the post, who are sharing the role between them. Bethany Hume and Lydia Prosser are bringing their own, complementary expertise and experience to the role.

## What brought you to The Auckland Project?

**Lydia:** This maternity cover role came up at a perfect time for me. I'd just completed my PhD on late medieval Scottish dress

and I was looking to build on my previous curatorial experience. I live locally and have visited the Palace frequently so the role really was ideal!

**Beth:** I loved working on the Faith Museum in 2022, researching objects for the Reformation Galleries, so I was excited when the opportunity came up to work with the Curatorial team again.

## Where did your interest in heritage come from?

**Lydia:** I was fortunate to have the opportunity to take part in a number of archaeological excavations in my local area when I was growing up. This really sparked my interest in the material remains and stories of the past and informed my decision to start volunteering for my local museum and to do my undergraduate degree in early medieval history, languages and literature.

**Beth:** I remember clearly as a child my mother pointing out a spot from where you could see ten centuries of history in the surrounding architecture and thinking how incredible it is that there are these hidden stories in plain sight all around us. This fascination with heritage led me to volunteer at local museums and pursue a career as a curator.

## What inspires you about Auckland Palace and the Faith Museum?

**Lydia:** I'm inspired by the many rich layers of history that the Palace and Faith Museum encompass – all of the individuals who have lived and worked here whose stories we tell, and all of the individuals who connect with the site in the present day, responding to it each in their own unique way based on their own experiences.

**Beth:** I am inspired by the depth of objects and architecture

we have on display from the medieval to the present day, and how visitors really identify with the stories told throughout the Palace and the Faith Museum. The way individuals have expressed their faith and devotion throughout history is inspiring – the objects might tell an individual's story but demonstrate universal ideas.

## What is your favourite room in the Palace?

**Lydia:** This is a difficult question! One of my favourite rooms is the Bishop's Study. Visitors sometimes don't realise that the books on display are the ones that were owned by the Bishops of Durham. There are some absolute gems in the historic library collection, ranging from large eighteenth-century leather-bound Bibles to schoolbooks with equations scrawled in the covers.

**Beth:** I love the Bishop's Study too! I think that is quite typical of curators to love books. Another of my favourite rooms is, of course, the Long Dining Room.

## What is your favourite object in the Faith Museum?

**Lydia:** This is also a difficult question – it's hard to pick just one! While visually not the most striking object, the fragmentary lead-alloy and iron vat on display in Gallery 1 is as valuable archaeologically as any shiny gold or gem-encrusted object in the collections. Dating to the eighth or early ninth century, this is one of only a handful of decorated early medieval lead vats known from Britain. They likely had a range of uses, including as portable baptismal fonts – as such this object is valuable evidence for early

Christian ritual and belief.

**Beth:** There are so many fantastic objects in the Faith Museum, but one I particularly enjoy is the Elizabethan banqueting trencher, which was a small wooden plate for desserts or sweetmeats. The trenchers were ornately decorated with flowers and patterns, and once you had finished your marzipan or crystallised fruit you would turn over the trencher to find a short verse written on the back (a bit like cracking open a fortune cookie at the end of a meal). Often, like the one currently on display, these were bible verses. The verse would spark an after-dinner discussion, and a host might have personalised their choice of moralising trencher for each guest.

## Where can you be found on a day off?

**Lydia:** Visiting a museum, archaeological site or walking in the countryside with my daughter.


**Beth:** Chasing after my two children, either at an art gallery, museum or along the beach.

## What are you looking forward to this Autumn and Winter?

**Lydia:** The cooler weather! And taking part in my first Christmas at the Palace.


**Beth:** I am really looking forward to the Neapolitan Nativity exhibition and all the Christmas festivities. We will be giving Friends a short introduction at the Christmas Party and really look forward to meeting everyone.





**It's back! The biggest Nativity in Britain returns to Bishop Auckland... and this time Auckland Palace will look more festive than ever.**

## Christmas at Auckland Palace

 Friday 21 November – Wednesday 31 December, excluding Christmas Day. \*Closed Mondays and Tuesdays (Open 22 & 23 December).

 10.30am - 4pm


 Auckland Palace – Bishop Auckland DL14 7NR

Immerse yourself in unrivalled festive splendour when you visit Auckland Palace's very special Christmas event. With 12 rooms sumptuously decorated, including the State Rooms, St Peter's Chapel and the Private Apartments, Christmas at Auckland Palace enables visitors to enjoy the remarkable interiors, complete with stunning artworks and furnishings, transformed with a touch of Christmas magic.

**Free access with our Bishop's Key annual pass.** Christmas at Auckland Palace tickets are also available online for non-pass holders and cost £20 for adults, £6 for children and £49

2 Adults and 2 Children (ages 5 - 15) for families

## Neapolitan Nativity

 Friday 21 November – Wednesday 31 December, excluding Christmas Day. \*Closed Mondays and Tuesdays.

 10.30am - 4pm

 Auckland Palace – Bishop Auckland DL14 7NR

By popular demand, the biggest Nativity scene of its kind in the UK is back in Bishop Auckland. Young and old will be astonished by over 421 intricately carved figures in this stunning 18th century Neapolitan treasure. This incredible Baroque presepe, known in Italian as a presepe, is a giant Nativity scene staged in a true-life Neapolitan setting. Measuring a remarkable 11ft tall and 15ft wide, it is one of the most impressive and important examples outside Italy.

**Included with a Christmas at Auckland Palace ticket or Bishop's Key.**

Book now: [aucklandproject.org/christmas](http://aucklandproject.org/christmas)

## Save the Date

### Friends' Christmas Party

December 16th 2025,  
1pm and 1.30pm

Join us for festive drinks and canapés, and a tour of the Auckland Palace Neapolitan Nativity with the curators.

Details [\[in the email or to follow??\]](#): RSVP to book your place.





