



Upminster Tithe Barn

TITHE TRAVELLING

The 500-year-old Upminster Tithe Barn brings local history to light this autumn as part of Open House London

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This mannequin of a monk has a ghostly history

Tucked away on Hall Lane in Upminster between the golf club and the playing fields sits a long, thatched building made of dark timber. It has a bit of a mysterious air, and if you time it right, you can walk straight through the doors and into Havering's medieval past.

Dating from 1450, the Upminster Tithe Barn was once part of the Upminster Hall estate owned by Waltham Abbey, where ailing monks recovered in the clean country air. It survived the Norman Conquest and centuries' worth of different owners before a narrow escape from developers in the 1960s. Now listed as an Ancient Monument, it houses what was once a museum of agriculture, but which has evolved into a Museum of Nostalgia dedicated to the history of everyday life

in Havering - and this September, it will welcome visitors from all over the city as part of Open House London.

Volunteer Andrew Skingley calls the Tithe Barn "Upminster's best-kept secret". Born and bred in Upminster, Andrew's fascination with local history led him to start volunteering at the Tithe Barn museum five years ago. When I ring him up, he's in a local resident's garage, investigating an antique dressing table which had been gathering dust for fifty years before its owner decided to give it to the museum. "Every time we open the doors, someone donates something," says Andrew.

There's a long tradition of surrendering things to the Tithe Barn: the clue is in the name. The story goes that it was used to store tithes received by the Church from the tenants of Upminster



Andrew Skingley with Upminster Tithe Barn's display of WWII medicines and medical equipment

Hall estate, but as history expert Brian Evans of Brentwood, director and volunteer at the Havering Museum, explains: "There's a bit of a controversy over that." Some say that none of the owners of Upminster Hall down the years ever had the right to collect tithes. "But the monks were a very powerful group who probably extracted tithes from their tenants," he says.

Upminster Tithe Barn is open every second weekend from April to October, but on September 17th and 18th it will take part in Open House London, when more than 750 buildings – including

many that are normally off-limits for visitors – will be open across the city for a weekend of free walks, talks, tours and fun family activities. The team at the Tithe Barn museum are gearing up for a wave of new visitors from all over London.

From the outside, its thatched roof gives the barn a cosy rural feel, but inside, "it's just amazing – everyone says it," says Andrew. The massive barn

was built around the same time as Canterbury Cathedral by carpenters from Kent, in a similar soaring style. "Look up at the roof inside," says Brian, "and it's like a cathedral in wood."

Some visitors might feel a tingle down the spine that has nothing to do with the architecture. "There is a little bit of an air about the place...it definitely has an atmosphere," says Brian. In addition to a suicide at the barn during WWII, he says a paranormal group once registered a spike of "emotion" from a dummy of a medieval monk – "perhaps a sick monk who collapsed or died here."

But most people come to keep the everyday history of Upminster alive for a new generation. "Kids come into the barn and ask, 'What's a typewriter?'," Andrew recalls. There are postcards from a local soldier to his sweetheart during WWI; vintage toys and telephones; and a milestone from the 17th century. "We help people with their homework about local history and it's more than just a place you walk into," says Brian. "It's the people and volunteers that make the difference."

Turn the page for more east London buildings taking part in Open House.



The Tithe Barn's Museum of Nostalgia is filled with memories of bygone Upminster