



GRESSENHALL
FARM AND WORKHOUSE
MUSEUM OF NORFOLK LIFE



heritage **open** days

Queer Nature

Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse

with

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ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND



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Behind the Scenes: Queer Nature

Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse is a site that encourages engagement with the outside world.

For 2020's Heritage Open Days *Hidden Nature* theme, we are focusing on our LGBTQ+ links in nature.

We aim to encourage a new way of looking at our site, as well as the world around us.



Exploring the exhibition

- Carnations
- Chickens
- Eels
- Elephants
- Lavender
- Lion
- Spotted hyaena
- The Little Mermaid
- Violets

Carnations

This is a bundle of R & A Taylor paper seed pockets of carnations. The different colours of carnations represent different things yellow for instance represents rejection and white means good luck. Green carnations have an interesting history as a symbol.

Green Carnations don't exist in nature they are made by putting a white carnation in malachite dye. They were popularized as a gay symbol by the famous writer Oscar Wilde in the 1890's. As green is not a natural colour for carnations it has been suggested that it was Wilde's way of mocking the idea that love between two men might be unnatural.

Green carnations are one of many LGBTQ+ symbols but they are unique in their relationship to Oscar Wilde, an important gay historical figure. Through them we can learn a small piece of LGBTQ+ history.

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Chickens

On the farm at Gressenhall they have a rare chicken breed, the Norfolk Grey, which was bred in Norwich in the early 20th century.

When keeping hens without a rooster it's not uncommon for the dominant hen to start acting like a rooster. Usually this behaviour subsides once the hen gets broody but on very rare occasions something else can occur. The hen will stop laying eggs and not only act male but also start to look male too. They become phenotypically male but remain genetically female so they can't father chicks.

Chickens can also display something called gyandromorphism, which is when an organism contains both male and female characteristics. They are different from hermaphrodites as they are split across their whole bodies with one half male and the other female. This can be bilaterally down the middle or with patches characteristic of one sex being on the body characteristic to the other sex

[Eels](#)

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Eels

This is an eel glave said to have been made by a blacksmith in Emneth. . They were used by eel catchers by trapping eels between two of the prongs by pushing it down into the eel and pulling it up. The ends of eel glaves are flat and rounded so as not to pierce the eel as they were extremely valuable.

Ribbon eels are found in lagoons and reefs in the Indian and Pacific oceans. All ribbon eels are born male, but as they get older and longer they start to develop female reproductive organs until they become entirely female and can lay eggs. You can see this transition through the eels colour, juveniles are black and as they grow they turn into the more well know blue with a yellow ribbon-like fin. They eventually become entirely yellow which signifies their transition to female.

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Elephants

This model of an African Elephant is yellow glazed earthenware. The rider on top serves as lid to an interior cannister but his head is missing. This object was donated to us by Miss Alice Harwood, from Beetley in 1984. It was reported to be one of her most treasured possessions.

Elephants are matriarchal, with females living in herds and the males alone or in much smaller male-only herds. The females live in solidarity and will actively fight back against male abuse. This supportive network enables them to be stronger than individual males, showing the power of sisterhood!

Both male and female elephants display bisexuality. Male elephants 'kiss' by placing their trunk in each other's mouths and intertwining their trunks. Interestingly, same-sex relationships last longer than heterosexual ones; years in comparison to fleeting encounters.

[Lavender](#)

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At Gressenhall we have lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) on site in our wonderful gardens.

For the LGBTQ+ community it is the flower itself that has symbolic meaning. The colour lavender comes from mixing pink and blue; culturally gendered colours and from the 1920s the term 'lavender boy' or having a 'streak of lavender' was used as a derogatory term for a man expressing 'feminine' characteristics. In 1929 American composer and songwriter Cole Porter wrote a song called 'I'm a Gigolo', which featured the line, "I'm a famous gigolo, and of lavender, my nature's got just a dash in it." This could have been a reference to his own sexual orientation just as much as the fictional character in the song. There was even a LGBTQ+ country music band during the 1970s called 'Lavender Country'.

Lavender is a plant that is grown across the world and highlights how one object can hold many different meanings.

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Lavender



Lion

This is a cast iron panel with a lion cast in cameo. This object is from Thornage Foundry (Thornage is a few miles south of Holt) which operated in the 19th century.

In Britain the lion has had a long symbolic past of being strong and proud, but recently we have developed our understanding of the animal itself.

One development in this understanding is homosexuality displayed in male lions. It has been reported that 8% of mating in lions occurs between two males.

In Botswana, 2016, a photographer thought they were recording one such example. However, in Botswana, some lionesses have a genetic disposition to have manes. This is thought to be because of a higher level of testosterone in the womb. This challenges the idea of the lion's mane representing strength and masculinity, but also proves that a maned lioness does not deter a mating partner – challenging our assumptions of traditional masculine and feminine attractive qualities.

[Spotted hyaena](#)

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This is a part of the skeleton of the West Runton Mammoth, discovered in 1990 on West Runton beach. This is the oldest and most complete skeleton of a Steppe Mammoth ever found in Britain. The Steppe Mammoth is an ancestor of the Woolly Mammoth, and this example lived around 700,000 years ago.

On this skeleton there is evidence of tooth marks from Spotted Hyaenas. Spotted Hyaenas were native in Norfolk during this time, and the same species still exists today in Africa.

Spotted Hyaena society is notable for the dominance shown by the females over males. There is a strict hierarchy, with the highest ranking female eating first to help her reproduce more successfully. The female Spotted Hyaena is also unique as she is the only female mammal that has no external vaginal opening, instead they possess a distended clitoris that resembles a penis (known as a 'pseudopenis'). Through this they urinate, mate and give birth. They also use it to have complete control over their mating partners; if she changes her mind after mating, she can immediately flush out the male's sperm and mate again with an alternative choice!

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Spotted Hyaena



This is a copy of Hans Christian Anderson's story 'The Little Mermaid'. The story was first published in 1837 and tells the story of a mermaid who wants to become a human being after falling in love with a Prince.

'The Little Mermaid' was inspired by Hans Christian Andersen's own feelings for a man called Duke Edvard Collin. Duke Collin was forced to marry a princess, due to pressure from his family and Andersen's love was unrequited. This is replicated in the 1837 version, where the Prince marries a different princess to Ariel.

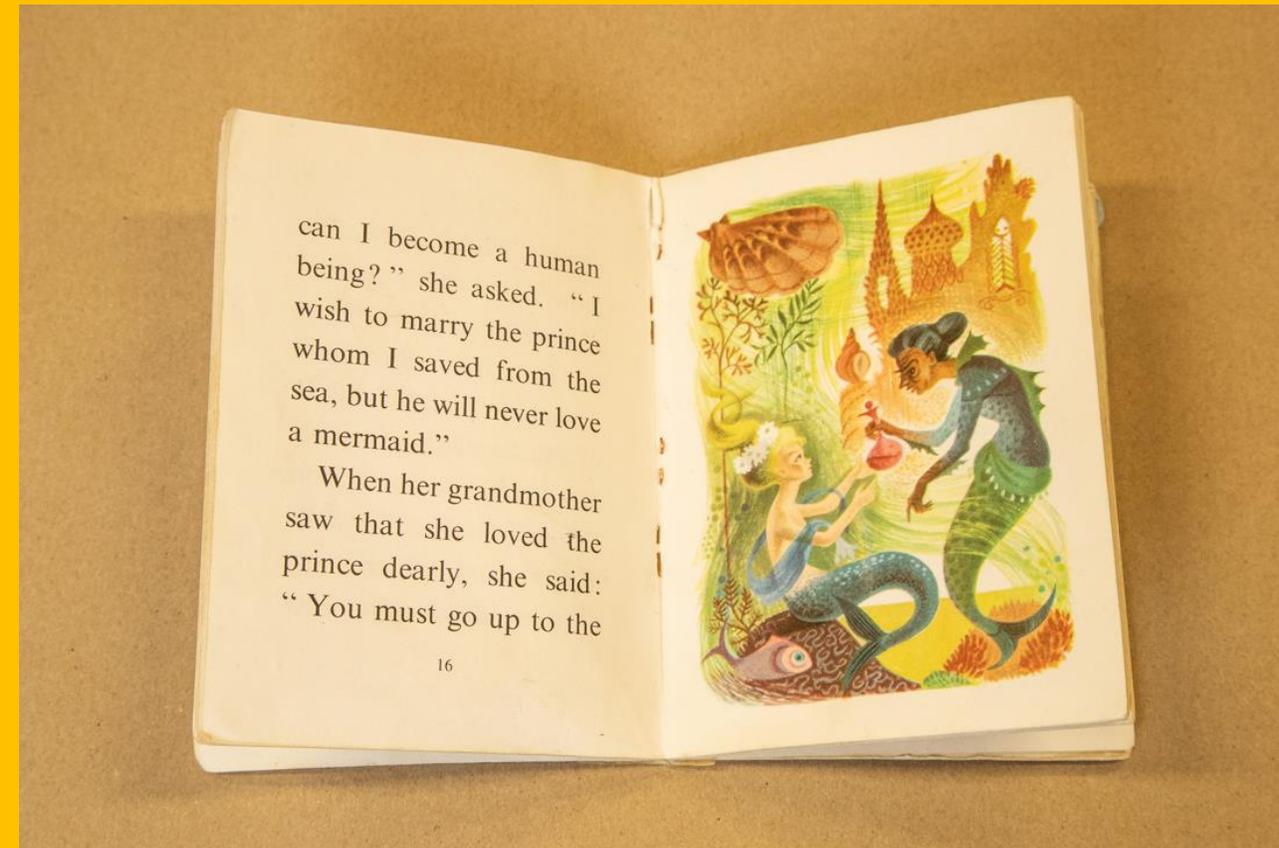
The story holds resonance with the transgender community today as well. Ariel's transformation from mermaid to human is described as painful and she is consequently disowned from her father and separated from her family. This is seen to reflect some people's transgender experience today. Taking inspiration from this the charity Mermaids UK was set-up to support gender nonconformity in young people, children and their families.

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The Little Mermaid



Violets

There are around 500 species of violet, a word coming from the Latin viola.

In the mid-20th century women would give violets to women they were trying to woo to express their interest, which was possibly inspired by a 1926 play *The Captive* in one woman sends violets to another.

The association of violets with lesbianism dates back to the poet Sappho in ancient Greece who lived on the island of Lesbos. In fact this is where the word lesbian comes from as anyone who lives on the island of Lesbos is a 'Lesbian'.

Her poetry only survives in fragments but in one she describes herself and her lover wearing garlands of violets hence the adoption of the flower as a symbol.

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