

THE SOCIETY FOR FOLK LIFE STUDIES

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Gloucester, England

12-15 September 2025

Conference themes:

* *Gloucestershire: ‘Forest and Vale and High Blue Hill’* *

The origins of Folklife collecting and Folk museums

Food cultures and traditions

PROGRAMME

[DRAFT at: 03-06-2025]

Please note:

*Due to the location of the conference hotel within Gloucester Quays, with many restaurants nearby, delegates will be able to select their own evening meals, which are **not charged within the conference fee**.*

FRIDAY, 12 SEPTEMBER

16:00-17:30 Registration at **Travelodge Gloucester, Gloucester Quays, St Ann Way, Gloucester GL1 5SF**

18:30 **Evening meal:** *Assemble in foyer of Travelodge to choose restaurants and dining companions*

SATURDAY, 13 September

07:30 -08:30 *Breakfast at Travelodge.*

08:45 Walk to *Discover DeCrypt*, St Mary de Crypt, Southgate Street, Gloucester, GL1 1TP, and assemble in the upstairs Cooke Room (stairs and lift access).

09:20-09:30 Lillis Ó Laoire (President of SFLS)
Welcome to the 2025 annual conference.

09:30-10:15 **Lecture 1**
 Tony Conder (Gloucester Civic Trust)
City of 'Shining Light'
 Gloucester owes its foundation to the river both as a transport link and crossing point. The city has used the river and the river has also shaped the city with its floods. Living beside the Severn brought a range of craft skills to the inhabitants and later, industry as a new waterway brought Victorian engineering to Gloucester. This is the story of the city's relationship with its waterways.

10:15-10:30 Briefing for self-guided City exploration.

10:30-14:30 **Excursion 1:**
Self-guided Gloucester City exploration and architectural 'treasure hunt', with an opportunity to watch the Gloucester Pride parade from the Cathedral to Gloucester Park (Parade starts at 11:00).
Time is also included for delegates to locate their own lunch (a list of restaurants and cafes will be provided).

14:30 *Reassemble at St Mary de Crypt*

14:30-15.15 **Lecture 2**
 David Viner (Cirencester)
Spokes in the Gloucestershire Wheel: traditional farm wagon design as a reflection of the county's landscape and agriculture.
 Before factory techniques imposed uniformity to wagon-building in the 20th century, traditional locally-made wagons were a functioning and regionally-distinctive embodiment of the 'old ways' - in design, scale and location. Examples from across Gloucestershire are evidence of a meeting place of the two main English wagon styles and a reflection of the county's own distinctive regions, one of the conference main themes. William Marshall's 1796 comment as, 'beyond every doubt the best farm waggon I have seen in the kingdom' describes the graceful Cotswold-style bow wagon. Specific local examples and their makers will be discussed and the richness of their output enjoyed.

15:15-16:00 **Lecture 3**
 Bridget Yates (Gressenhall)
H J Massingham and Harold Greening, collecting 'country relics' in the Cotswolds.
 This correspondence at Winchcombe Museum chronicled the very start of H.J. Massingham's collection, much of it gathered for him by Greening, which he wrote up in *Country Relics* of 1939, which was illustrated by Thomas Hennell, and which later became the foundation collection at Reading

16:00-16:30 *Coffee and Tea*

16:30-17:30 **Shorter paper 1:**
 16:30-17:00
 Tiernan Gaffney (National Museum of Ireland)
Framing Tradition: The Craft of Wooden Sieve-Making in Ireland
 This paper explores the traditional craft of wooden sieve-making in Ireland, examining its role in food production, domestic work, and rural craftsmanship. Sieves, essential tools in processing grains, dairy, and other foodstuffs, were once widely handmade using locally sourced wood and stretched animal hide. Focusing on John Hamilton, a sieve-maker from Naul, North County Dublin, this study highlights the techniques of sieve making and types of sieves as well as emphasizing their place within the broader contexts of vernacular woodworking and social context within community and agrarian food culture.
 This research was undertaken for an online gallery on wooden sieves in the National Museum of Ireland's Folklife Collection, and this paper will discuss archival sources, oral histories, and museum artefacts that build on the work of former NMI Director and SFLS member, A.T. Lucas.

Shorter paper 2

17:00-17:30

Sarah Blowen (Bristol)

Gloucestershire identity in sport, poetry and music

17:30-18:30 *Free time*

18:30 **Evening meal**

Assemble in foyer of Travelodge to choose restaurants and dining companions

SUNDAY, 14 September

07:30 -08:45 *Breakfast at Travelodge.*

09:00 *Walk to The Cooke Room, upstairs in St Mary de Crypt,
Southgate Street, Gloucester, GL1 1TP (stairs and lift access).*

09:30-10:15 **Lecture 4**

Chris Sullivan (Forest of Dean Local History Society)

The Forest of Dean -A part of Gloucestershire?

The historical Royal Forest of Dean was isolated by topography from the rest of Gloucestershire and faced as much towards Herefordshire and modern Wales. Its poor hilly land was left for trees, with the underlying minerals exploited continuously since before the Romans. Increasing industrialisation shaped both landscape and people. Too weak agriculturally to be self-sufficient, the Dean had to face outwards, both to trade and migration, whether it liked it or not. Today, the scars of heavy industry are fading, and like everywhere else, new dormitory housing and incomers homogenise the locality they have joined.

10:15-11:00 **Lecture 5**

David J Eveleigh (Birkenhead)

Oliver Baker (1856-1939) – a case study in early folk life and ‘bygones’ collecting

Oliver Baker, a Birmingham born artist, writer and antiquarian, was an early collector of old oak furniture and domestic bygones. His collecting began around 1880 when he combined sketching holidays in the Welsh Marches and North Wales with energetic searches for ‘old things’ in remote villages, farms and cottages. Some of his finds were used to furnish his home and also served as source material for two of his three books – ‘Black Jacks and Leather Bottles’ (1921) and ‘In Shakespeare’s Warwickshire’ (1937). He was also acquired items to sell on and some found their way into museum collections.

The survival of some of his diaries along with other family papers provides a unique opportunity to build up a picture of the *modus operandi* of an early collector in this area of material culture. It also enables us to reach a fuller understanding of the nature of Baker’s collecting and its impact on museum curatorial work before his death in 1939 when the concept of ‘scientific’ folk life collecting was still in its infancy. Oliver Baker – along with other collectors of his generation – laid the foundations of folk life as a museum discipline – but could he ever be described as a student and proponent of folk life studies?

11:00-11:15 *Tea & coffee*

11:15-12:00 **Lecture 6**

Peter Brears (Leeds)

Early plans for a national Folk Museum for England [working title]

[An account culled from the pages of the *Museums Journal*]

12:00-12:45 **Lecture 7**

Clodagh Doyle (National Museum of Ireland)

‘Nil aon tinteán mar do thinteán féin’: Hearth furniture from the Famine to rural electrification

12:45-13:30 *Buffet lunch at St Mary de Crypt*

13:45-17:30 Excursion 2 The Dean Heritage Centre (Camp Mill, Soudley, Forest of Dean GL14 2UB)

The Museum is run by the Dean Heritage Museum Trust, whose aim is "To preserve the Forest of Dean's heritage through stories and artefacts". There is a wide range of subjects and activities featured in the Museum, including forestry and timber, charcoal production, iron ore extraction and smelting, coal mining, relevant geology, early steel production, fishing, riots and clockmaking.

13:45-14:30 Coach travel from Gloucester to the Dean Heritage Centre

14:30-16:30 Explore the museum displays and the site.

16:45-17:30 Return coach travel to Gloucester

17:30-18:30 *Free time*

18:30 Evening meal

Assemble in foyer of Travelodge to choose restaurants and dining companions

Monday, 15 September

07:30 -08:45 *Breakfast at Travelodge.*

09:00 Walk to The Cooke Room, upstairs in St Mary de Crypt, Southgate Street, Gloucester, GL1 1TP (stairs and lift access).

09:30-10:15 Lecture 8

Tiber Falzett (University College Dublin)
[Title tbc]

10:15-10:45 Shorter paper 3

Margaret Bennett (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland)

Food for the body, food for the soul: Oatmeal as a staple diet

The Trotternish Peninsula in the Isle of Skye was once known as the 'Granary of Skye' because it had the ideal conditions for growing oats. Oatmeal has been part of the staple diet for centuries, and although rolled oats, or 'porridge oats' became widely available by the turn of the twentieth century, they were not universally adopted by the entire population. Reflecting on my post-war childhood in Skye, this paper discusses the common uses of oatmeal as part of the daily diet of a family of crofter-fishermen.

10:45-11:00 *Tea & coffee*

11:00- 11:30 Shorter paper 4

Steven Blake (Cheltenham)

Who was 'Little John the Muffin Man'? Researching an enigmatic Cheltenham character

The Wilson Art Gallery & Museum at Cheltenham has a collection of eight small early 19th-century watercolours and silhouettes showing a diminutive street vendor identified in a contemporary hand on the reverse of one of them as 'John Milbank alias 'Little John' the Cheltenham Muffin Man'. In addition to these, at least another eight comparable portraits are known to exist in private collections, plus silhouette portraits of him from a local newspaper and drawn on the inside cover of an 18th-century Bible. He is also included in views of Cheltenham High Street published as a lithograph in 1840 and as a guidebook illustration in 1845.

This talk will reveal what is known of John Milbank and will pose the question of why so many portraits of him were produced, and by whom, all of them being anonymous. It will also identify a number of other early 19th-century Cheltenham street vendors and working people of whom contemporary portraits,

including several prints, are known and will tentatively explore what might be termed the ‘the cult of unlikely personality’.

11:30-12:00 **Shorter paper 5**

Steph Mastoris (Swansea)

F L Griggs and the Cotswold Idyll.

In late 1903 the artist F L Griggs (1876-1938) first visited Chipping Campden and for the rest of his life considered the place as the epitome of a rural idyll. This paper looks briefly at Griggs’ response to this and how his work contributed to the growing celebration of Cotswold vernacular from the late 19th century.

12:05

A brief reflection on the conference themes and a farewell to delegates.

End of Conference

Please note:

*The Annual General Meeting of the Society for Folk Life Studies
will take place on-line (via Zoom), on Tuesday 30 September, at 18:00hrs (UK time).*

Papers and joining details will be circulated after the conference.