

DodoLab's Thetford Travelling Menagerie



THE GHOST RABBIT



THE MOLE



THE LURCHER



THE PHEASANT



THE CANADA GOOSE



THE RED SQUIRREL



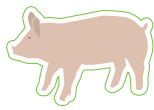
THE EUROPEAN STARLING



THE GREAT BUSTARD



THE MASTODON



THE PIG



THE DODO

During the week of March 21st to 26th, the Canada-based creative collective DodoLab was in Thetford with their project *The Thetford Travelling Menagerie*. The goal of the project was to use stories and images of local animals (past and present, real and imagined) to inspire people in the community to share and talk about their perceptions of Thetford today. **DodoLab wanted to know what belongs, what's been lost, what keeps people away, and what draws them in?**

Like many of DodoLab's projects, *The Thetford Travelling Menagerie* emphasized collaborations with the community by working directly with established organizations and groups and by engaging the public in public. We created several installations, including a set of bright green banners along King Street which featured the menagerie creatures, an installation at the library, and a window display at the Ancient House Museum that displayed a knitted version of the menagerie created by the museum's *Knit & Knatter* group. These installations

were followed by a series of discussions with both individuals and community groups, where the animal stories written by DodoLab were used to inspire conversations about Thetford. We spoke with staff at Ancient House and Thetford Library, the *Knit & Knatter* Group, the library reading group, members of the historical society and youth and staff at the *Meet Up Cafe* (Redcastle Furze Community Centre). The project concluded at Thetford's Saturday market, where we asked market goers "How do you feel about Thetford today?" and gave each participant an animal badge based on their stories and ideas. Over the course of the week, DodoLab spoke with well over a hundred people about Thetford.

So what did we hear about Thetford? Well if we want to refer to our menagerie as a guide, the story of the Red Squirrel, which is about the negative impact of change, and the Ghost Rabbit, which is about the way negative stories can shape perception of place, were probably the most consistent themes to emerge at the beginning of conversations. But it would be misleading to stop there as the longer the discussions went, the more nuanced and reflective they became. Many negative perceptions were challenged by the same people who initially described them, and as the conversations went on many positive stories and ideas about Thetford surfaced.



DODOLAB WITH THE READING GROUP



DODOLAB WITH THE KNIT & KNATTERS

The complex issue of change was voiced by a diversity of people, including those with significant Thetford ancestry, longtime residents and newcomers. People saw Thetford as a place with a deep history of profound, and often very quick, changes that have left people struggling to adapt. Many of the people we spoke with were directly linked to the dramatic changes which happened in the last century, having family and employment connections to the military bases (although we encountered no military personnel) or having come to Thetford with their family with the London overspill in the 1960s. There was a strong belief that the sudden growth that came with the overspill overwhelmed the town's infrastructure. But we also heard how in wanting to "let the dust settle" the town later missed out on the opportunity for significant new retail development in the downtown. It was not that people felt all change was bad but rather that the pace and timing of change in Thetford had not been ideal. Several people voiced the concern that current development was repeating this

trend and that the emphasis on expanding the town's periphery and establishing strong commuting connections was having a detrimental effect on Thetford's core. In the end, what the conversations reflected was a strong awareness that it is not so much the specific changes but how the community addresses and manages change that is the real issue of concern in Thetford. So in returning to our menagerie, we wondered: **What can a town do to follow the story of the Lurcher (creative adaptation) rather than that of the Dodo (extinction through failure to adapt to rapid change)?**



DODOLAB AT THE MARKET

The prominence of the relatively recently established Portuguese community was widely acknowledged but the status of more recent newcomers (particularly Eastern Europeans) was a point of general concern mainly because of the sense that there was a lack of support and opportunity for these people to integrate into the community. We were aware of the fact that the majority of people we spoke with were cautious in their comments concerning recent newcomers, not wanting to appear unwelcoming but being equally sensitive to the need for adequate tools to accommodate this influx of people. We know that issues of change and integration are difficult in any community. Words like “community,” “traditions” and “belonging” are loaded and the stories we tell about ourselves can be both empowering and divisive, enriching or limiting. What we heard in Thetford was not unique; the idea of integration and accommodation has emerged as one of the dominant perplexing challenges around the world and many of the same concerns about the place of outsiders or newcomers has arisen in other communities where we've worked. A number of people mentioned that many of nostalgic memories about Thetford's past fail to include the negative aspects of earlier times and that this image of an ideal past can fail to recognize the good changes that have been implemented and the role a long line of newcomers have had in shaping and enriching the town. It was clear that the stories being told about the past are affecting how people see the town today. So we wondered: **How can a place use stories about itself as a way to spark positive changes and new perceptions?**

We heard a lot about the many working families in town, how busy they are and how this meant that they were not really able to be very active in their community. This left us with

the sense that it takes extra time and effort to be involved and to get connected, rather than being able to be a part of the community through everyday activities and necessary chores like buying groceries for example. People expressed the feeling that the downtown was once a hub and connector in the community but the loss of independent, locally owned and run businesses providing essentials had changed the dynamic of King Street. Many people complained about the state of this shopping area (too many charity shops was a common statement) but this situation is hardly unique to Thetford and appears consistent throughout much of the country. (Compared to the centres of many North American towns and cities, Thetford's core actually seemed quite vibrant to us.) We were reminded by a few people that this view is coloured by a certain amount of nostalgia that overlooks the fact that there were many times in the past when people couldn't afford to buy what was available in the local shops. Though the higher end retail shops and cafes people spoke of wanting may come, we wondered about the benefits of access to affordable services and goods for local people. We actually heard from a number of people that they moved to Thetford because they could afford to buy a house, which they would not have been able to do elsewhere. **This left us wondering about how to measure prosperity – should it not consider a balance between income and cost of living?** In Fort McMurray, Alberta, for example, we found the average salary to be enormous compared to the national average but the living costs are so high that most people struggle to get by. **Perhaps Thetford's affordability should be embraced and promoted as a good thing?**

In addition to affordability, a lot of people said they chose to move to Thetford because of its scale and walkability. Many newcomers expressed the feeling that the negative reputation the town has is undeserved, and based on our brief encounter with the community we'd have to agree. Many of the negative issues people raised are not unique to Thetford, but many of the positives are. To live in a town with a pedestrian core linked out by walkable and bikeable trails and paths, a town that is of a scale that offers a greater opportunity for civic engagement than larger centres and that appears to have many committed and engaged citizens and organizations is very appealing. A place that reflects continuity between past and present, strives to meaningfully engage newcomers and young people in the ongoing process of town development, and embraces a history of adapting to change are elements of a story that could be developed and told of Thetford.

- DodoLab

Visit us at www.dodolab.ca to get a longer version of this text, see the animal stories, learn more about the project or tell us what you think!

The Thetford Travelling Menagerie is a project by Lisa Hirmer and Andrew Hunter as DodoLab Commissioned by Deborah Smith as part of Thetford Art Projects and funded by Breckland Partnership. DodoLab is a project of the University of Waterloo School of Architecture funded by Musagetes.