

Past Presence

Ten Years of Museum Visiting



**James
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Cover: Lyme Regis Museum
Title page: Derby Museum & Art Gallery
Back Cover: Chertsey Museum

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Introduction – the Museum World

A degree in history from Oxford – provided I got it – was all very well, but what was I going to do with it? In the middle of 1990 Elspeth King, the keeper of the People's Palace museum in Glasgow, was at the centre of a controversy when she was passed over as the city museum service's Keeper of Social History, due, so the papers said, to being the wrong sex, the wrong class, and having the wrong attitudes. I was in the middle of my history course when I read the articles about the quarrel enveloping the museums in Glasgow, and far wider. It had never occurred to me that museums could matter that much. I read about what Elspeth King had been attempting to do at the People's Palace, to rescue the untold, grassroots story of Glasgow's past from the skip, the wrecking ball, and the condescension of the cultural establishment, and I thought that was a worthwhile way of spending one's time. I had my answer what to do with my love of history. Being a teacher was harder work than I felt cut out for; being an academic was too remote. I would be a museum curator.

All the information said that the few places available on the Museum Studies course at Leicester University were fiercely contested, so I maximised my chances by volunteering at Poole Museums for a couple of holidays, getting to know the cycle route very well indeed. Like generations of museum volunteers who are keen but know nothing, I was given a box of stuff that had been hanging round for two years and told to catalogue it. The box contained the collection of a lately deceased local senior Scout. It was the swastika medal from the 1930s that caught me up short.

My application to Leicester was bolstered by an outrageously pretentious analysis of a set of museum displays I'd cast an eye over, in an attempt to persuade the staff I was serious about the matter. The seasoned museum professional and academic interviewing me smiled, nodded, and threw it away as I left the room. In actual fact the numbers on the course had just been doubled to over forty so there was no real prospect that I'd get rejected anyway. I joined an eclectic and international *omnigatherum* of souls all pursuing the goal of employment in the museum sector: some of us would actually make it. I spent those nine months or so in constant transit between my tiny room in a shared flat high, high up in an Edwardian apartment building west of the city centre, the Museum Studies Department in its convoluted converted house somewhere off the Princess Road, the library,

and occasionally the launderette. I will leave most stories about the museums that ended up employing me until the relevant parties have safely left this world, but I'll try to give a flavour.

My first job arose out of my work-placement from Leicester. The Priest's House Museum in Wimborne was convenient for me (only a few miles from my parents' home) and, as it turned out, convenient for the Museum, as I came along at just the right time to be employed, once I'd finished my course, as Documentation Assistant. My task was to list all the artefacts after a major refurbishment of the building and displays, sorting out the records and reconciling paperwork with actual objects. One of the old index cards is still my all-time favourite museum catalogue entry: it bore the single descriptive word 'Object' with the donor's name given as 'Commander ?' There was also the episode of the inflatable parrot, with which, mercifully, I wasn't directly involved.

That job was a limited contract only and despite being extended twice the money eventually ran out so after a little bit of a hiatus I was eventually accepted for employment at the Royal Engineers' Museum in Chatham. My first introduction to the ways of the Armed Forces, which has stood me in good stead ever since, came with the news that I wasn't being appointed to the job I'd actually applied for. There had been two positions on offer: Exhibitions Assistant, and Registrar, the latter being basically the job I'd been doing at Wimborne but for more pay. My new colleague Alistair had been an Exhibitions Officer in a museum in Scotland. The Corps of Royal Engineers had decided to swap us both to the jobs that better suited our previous experience, when the whole reason we'd each applied for the opposite one had been to *broaden* that experience. Still, work was work. At the REM, there was a tiny hatch you could enter inside the World War One recruiting scene display which led into a weird vacant space that ran between the display areas. After a few twists and turns in the dark, you opened another door and emerged into the World War Two Home Front setup with Dad reading the paper and Mum putting up the blackout curtains while the children gazed disconsolately at their rationed dinner. It felt very disconcertingly like coming into someone's actual sitting room, travelling twenty-five years in a few yards. Then one morning while opening up I realised Lorraine the gallery warder (one of whose claims to fame was that she'd sat on Ken Livingstone's knee on the bus trip back from a field study day as a biology student) was describing a weird, convoluted route around the displays, flattening herself against walls and clambering over piles of sandbags. When I questioned her about this she looked very shifty

and eventually admitted that the attendants had worked out a way of going through the whole museum without setting off any of the sound effects, but I wasn't to tell anyone because it was their secret. I was, in fact, very relieved to find out how not to trigger George Formby singing about the Home Guard again. Finally, I will mention that somehow I got the job of overseeing the museum shop which meant reconciling what we'd sold each week with the remaining stock. We had a range of dreadful postcards, the worst of which was one of great Corps hero General Gordon in his Chinese mandarin's robes, looking very much as though he was dead nearly two decades before it actually happened. I worked out that at the current rate of sales it would take 2,100 years to get through the whole reserve.

I lasted at Chatham about four years and then relocated to Wycombe Museum as Assistant Museums Officer – no.2, in other words. I'd been interviewed just before beginning a holiday and on getting back to work and delighted to have got a job that I thought looked really good, I picked up the *Museums Journal*, idly thumbed the jobs pages and felt pleased that I probably wouldn't have to check them again for a few years. There, I saw my new boss Pat's job being advertised. I phoned. 'Ah yes', he said, 'I forgot to mention, I'm moving.' 'So how long is the overlap between me arriving and you leaving?' I asked. 'A fortnight,' he replied. So two weeks after arriving I was technically in charge of the place, and much relieved when the new Museums Officer, Val, arrived and I was in charge no longer. I had made an impression on my first day at Wimborne by not turning up: it was a Bank Holiday and I wasn't aware I was supposed to. On my first day at Wycombe, in contrast, I arrived before anyone else had, and set off the alarms, unaware how to turn them off because nobody had told me there were alarms to *be* turned off. In fact, my time in High Wycombe turned out to be a (mainly) lovely seven years, and I learned so much about the history of the town that the prospect of beginning all over again somewhere else was too terrifying, and I left to become an Anglican priest instead.

The irony of working in a museum was that the last thing I wanted to do was visit museums in my spare time; whereas ceasing to work in the museum world has liberated me to enjoy going to see museums. I still retain enough of my early People's-Palace radicalism to respect a museum that strives to have an impact on the way its community, and the individuals who come to it, think about themselves; and to believe that a good museum, given the chance, can affect the world *for* good. Even if a museum is less ambitious than that, just being made to smile, or wonder, at something unexpected, and to thrill a little at physical contact with the past, or other

takes on the present, is something to be delighted at. Objects are the vessels of other lives and ways of being, and museums give them voice.

The RE Museum is a specialist collection, but my other workplaces were general local museums. Some of those have a special interest due to the accidents of history: High Wycombe was a furniture-making town, so its museum has a particular interest in furniture (especially chairmaking), but its collection comprises, in theory, everything from its vicinity. It's that sort of museum I'm most interested in. Of course when in London, for instance, I pop now and again into the great national museums, those universities of material culture which have a secure place in the affections of the nation and (relatively) stable funding and institutional support, but I want to sing the praises of their humbler relations, scattered through cities, towns and villages, who sometimes get by with the occasional services of a shared professional curator and relying, very often, on squadrons of devoted volunteers.

Over the years I've been visiting, the municipal museum has become a threatened breed. There seems never to have been a time when local councils are not worrying about their budgets, and as museums are not a statutory service (libraries are) they are always vulnerable. At Wimborne there was a time when the office computer had a folder entitled 'SaveOurJobs', containing all the evidence amassed to justify the museum's continued existence and funding. While I was at Wycombe we were generally shielded from the Council's repeated convulsions of job-cutting, reorganization and initiatives by the fact that we were off-site up the hill and nobody really knew what we did, but that didn't always work. There was one very hairy moment not long after the Council introduced 'cabinet' government to replace the old committee system, and the first cabinet, consisting of all the most Thatcherite councillors, commissioned a leading firm of accountants to assess all the authority's services for efficiency and to make recommendations for what could be cut, privatised, or abandoned completely. The staff all knew this was coming, and finally we were summoned to attend two massive meetings in the Council offices to reveal the new plan which, we at the Museum were absolutely sure, would lead to our demise. *On the morning we were due to go* there was an awkward phone call from the Head of Leisure: 'That meeting you were coming to? It's off. We'll let you know more.' They never did. What had happened was that, first thing that morning, the cabinet had presented the report to the wider ruling Tory group who threw up their hands in horror whereon the whole

thing was instantly shelved *and never spoken of again*. The only practical result was the huge fee that went into the pockets of the consultants.

Hiving your museum off as an independent trust seems like an easy win: but for the museum itself the liberation from municipal strictures and structures comes at the cost of a more precarious existence, and perhaps the erosion of the professional standards curators have spent decades championing. But some survive, and what others are able to achieve is often remarkably good. Even when the results are perhaps less than professionally correct, it's a rare collection that offers nothing to enjoy in the form of surreal juxtapositions, unexpected insights, and occasional beauty.

I think museums are wonderful. They are full of delight and surprise, and even enlightenment now and again. They are the places where we touch – at least visually – the things the people of the past have touched, and, by a sympathetic magic, touch the minds of the people too. They deepen our sense of what it means to be human, social beings.

Most of the museums described here are in southern England, though I do venture over the borders into Scotland (*just over*), Wales and the Channel Islands on occasion (not Northern Ireland – sorry about that). Not unnaturally, even though holidays have taken me northwards, westwards and eastwards, Dorset and Surrey, where I've lived, feature disproportionately. But you get, I hope, the general idea. The variety I *have* tried to include concerns the scale and personality of museum, ranging from big municipal museum services to recently-established collections to tiny localised ventures, and all stops in between.

These pages are not really a guidebook, more a report on a decade of museum visiting. They can't be a guidebook because museums, inconveniently, don't always stand still: they change. No museum display is ever the last word; different eras, even a mere decade or two apart in time, may think about that past differently. At least three museums featured here, at Richmond in Surrey and Dorchester and Wimborne in Dorset, have undergone major refurbishments between my visits, and now look significantly different from what I saw on the earlier occasion. Instead what I hope to put across is the wondrous variety and inventiveness of these often little-sung treasurehouses of past time, their charm and humour and occasionally passion. Come with me and see what you can find.

1. Haslemere Educational Museum, Spring 2012

Founded: 1888

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Natural history, archaeology, ethnology

In *The Buildings of England* volume for Surrey, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner couldn't get over the appearance of Haslemere Town Hall, built in 1814 and yet looking as though it was about two centuries older: he felt it demonstrated the isolation of this town in the Surrey hills. There was little prospect of the good denizens of Victorian Haslemere making it up to the great Natural History Museum in London to be educated in the wonders of the natural world, and so surgeon and Haslemere resident Sir Joseph Hutchinson, who was keen that they should be, set up what is really a small version of that august institution, using his own collection: after a couple of moves it ended up in the current building. It also, very incongruously, absorbed the Peasant Arts Museum, established in the 1890s by a group of Haslemere artists who aimed at revivifying British art with the vigour of European folk art traditions.

Sir Joseph Hutchinson's didactic intentions are still quite plain as you walk round the galleries, proceeding through the story of the development of the Earth's flora and fauna, beginning with rocks and ending with mammals, taking in along the way stuffed birds and the head of a gigantic whale shark, looking very peeved at his current predicament. You can still spot some Victorian labels if you keep your eyes peeled, but overall the displays are more imaginative than that suggests. You also get a smattering of Egyptology and old toys for your money.

The Museum's gardens contain more of interest including (according to the season) a working beehive you can look in and the original Green Lion whose modern replacement sits in Green Lion Field to the west of the town. I particularly liked the Green Lion because we had a *Red* Lion at Wycombe Museum. Once upon a time it had sat on a portico outside the eponymous pub in the High Street, and was replaced by a modern one in the same position. Children would be awfully confused by its apparent bilocation. I wonder if they get the same at Haslemere.



2. Bakewell Old House Museum, Autumn 2012

Founded: 1954

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local & social history

Most of the time, local history societies and enthusiasts decide they would like a museum in their community, set up a group to bring it about, and look around for somewhere to house the collection, sometimes waiting for years until suitable premises become available. In Bakewell, they did it the other way around. Up a hill from the centre of this tangled, stone-built riverside town lies the Old House, a substantial Tudor dwelling built for the steward of the Gell family of Hopton, as well as serving as a storehouse for the tithes of the Hopton estate. Towards the end of the 1700s the great engineer and industrialist Richard Arkwright opened a mill locally and converted the Old House into cottage dwellings for his workers. Quite a history for this not-very-big collection of buildings, and one which lends itself to a variety of interpretation. The Local History Society was formed to preserve the Old House, and the volunteers of the Society gamely take on the task to this day.



It helps that this is a higgledy-piggledy, charming building. A lot of the actual collection is relatively common local and social-history matter which you can see in most small museums, but it inhabits the space in such a way that a visitor's imagination is prodded to picture the place in its various incarnations, and the people who lived there: sometimes it feels as

though some Stuart gentleman might reappear through a doorway. There is a genuine sense of presence, and the structure has all the beauty of the Derbyshire architectural vernacular. For some reason I didn't take many photographs of its rooms, fireplaces and beams – a great oversight!

3. Derby Museum & Art Gallery, Autumn 2012

Founded: 1836

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Art, local history, ethnography

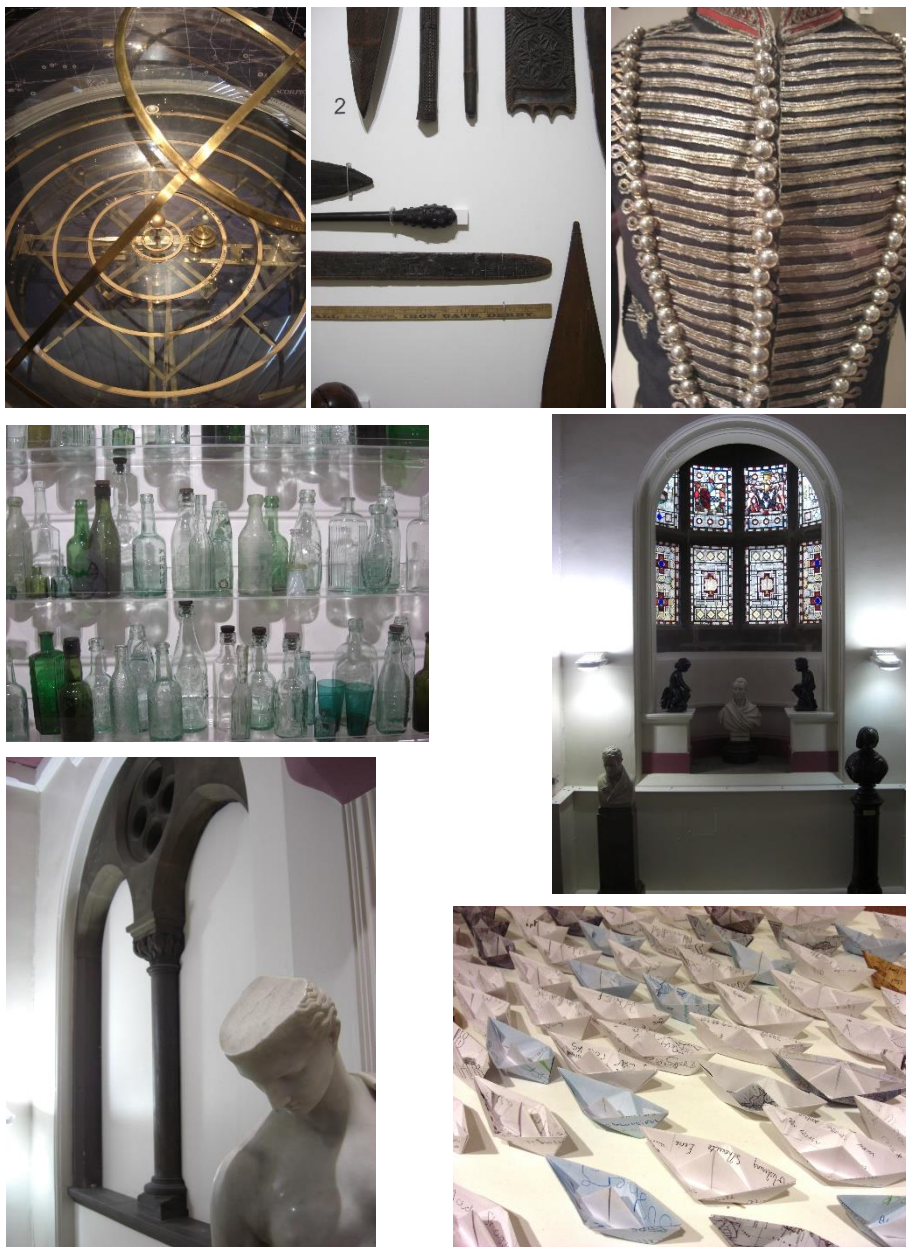


My visit to the civic treasure-house of Derby Museum was a bit of a rush on a damp weekday afternoon, and as I had to scoot around it not long before it closed, I couldn't do the place justice. The museum owes its origins to a typically eclectic Victorian gathering of impedimenta assembled by a local society, and it once occupied an typically Victorian Library building. It has a neo-Tudor wing, Gothic arches, stumpy little pitched roofs that look as though they've come from a French renaissance chateau, and is all in violent red brick apart from the upper stages of the tower which are sandstone and then finally timber. Thankfully you don't have to look at this nutty structure any more, and instead enter via a relatively recently-refurbished 1960s extension which is nice and clean and modern.



Understandably, the art of Joseph Wright and Derby porcelain both feature largely in the DMAG's galleries, but I have to admit that in my hasty exploration of the place I missed both. Instead I found myself marvelling at some of the arrangements in the archaeology and ethnographic displays, and the exhibition '1001 Objects', a way of

displaying some of the unassociated bits all museums tend to accumulate, by arranging objects on an aesthetic rather than informational basis. Every museum should have room for that, I think.



4. Buxton Museum & Art Gallery, Autumn 2012

Founded: 1880

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history, archaeology, geology

Another Victorian municipal museum, Buxton is gorgeous. Geology bulks large in its collections, partly because of the prominence of the eminent Victorian & Edwardian scholar William Boyd Dawkins. In a remarkable gesture Dawkins bequeathed his entire study to the museum, not just his papers and specimens but the whole room and everything in it; where on earth he got that idea from is beyond me, but the resulting gallery is delightful. It even has a top hat on a table.



Buxton was a Roman spa town long before it became a Georgian one and the displays of the Museum's archaeology collection build salvaged bits and pieces into archways, fountains and shrines to generate a compelling visual impression of Roman-ness. Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, there is the relatively recent addition to the collection of an extensive display of Derbyshire Black Ware, geometrically arranged in sidelit cabinets to bring

out its charismatic and somewhat terrible beauty. I had no idea Derbyshire Black Ware even existed. Here is a town confident in its elegance and identity, says Buxton Museum, and who can gainsay that.



5. Castle Cary Museum, Autumn 2013

Founded: 1974

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history



My mum's family come from the area around Castle Cary: the little Somerset town was the metropolis around which their lives revolved in the 1940s. Like many such places it is not what it once was, but remains rather delightful. In the centre of its High Street sits the Gothic-arched, honey-stoned, Victorian Market

House, looking like a little bit of medieval Bruges or somewhere like that, transported to the South Somerset hills. The Museum began life in the back of a shop and a few years later moved to the Market House, now occupying the first floor. It's entirely volunteer-run and has more than a shade of the old-fashioned 'stick-everything-in-a-room-and-if-you-can-theme-stuff-all-the-better' approach, but it now dubs itself 'The Castle Cary and District Museum' – a nod in the direction of modernity, as was a display they staged in 2012 on the history of a local veterinary supplies business.

I thought that the photographs I'd taken didn't really give much of an idea of the Museum, especially the mummified mice which look as though they're gyrating about in a curious postmortem dance. In fact the picture above shows the main room through the glass counter display in front, with its china, pots, what used to be called by the wonderful catch-all category 'rural bygones' (everything from hay knives to milk churns), and a great cartwheel that sits in the centre of the room and binds the whole arrangement together. It's a somewhat chaotic *omnium gatherum* of stuff, but fun.



6. Tavistock Museum, Autumn 2013

Founded: 2003

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

Tavistock has the strange sense of being a frontier town - it reminds me a bit of Alnwick and places in Northumberland. This is despite the fact that the only frontier it's near is the one between Cornwall and the rest of England, although that means a lot to the Cornish (and arguably the Devonians as well). The sensation may be something to do with the crenelations and turrets which dominate the grey Hurdwick stone and granite buildings in the town centre, many built by the Dukes of Bedford with the proceeds of mining royalties. In one of these, Court Gate, you will find tiny Tavistock Museum. *Bijou* though it may be, the Museum website is a bit too modest in describing it as occupying two rooms, as it does have a little downstairs vestibule and shop with a small film room. Tavistock is distinguished from the run-of-the-mill West Country market town by its medieval Abbey (mostly now gone, of course, with the exception of a wall here and there) and its long history as a centre of mineral exploitation on the western half of Dartmoor and the villages between there and the Tamar.

You find this history reflected in the collection of the Museum, as there are some very nice bits and pieces crammed into those two little rooms. I learned more than I expected about the mining industry hereabouts and the role the town played as its focus, as I wasn't aware of anything more than the ubiquitous tin and a bit of lead being grubbed up from the unwilling earth of West Devon. The collection has a charm, and provides a sense of place, that many larger museums can only dream of, if they even think of it; there is something strangely moving about work boots put on display in a case, I find.





7. St Ives Museum, Autumn 2013

Founded: 1924

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

In no other case are my caveats that museums change, and that people see the same things differently, more necessary here. You should take what you are about to read with that very much in mind. St Ives Museum may be completely different now, some years on from my visit: though its online

presence suggests it isn't. It also gets 4 ½ out of 5 on Tripadvisor from no fewer than 273 reviews, so a lot of people appreciate it. I am also breaching my customary rule that, if you can't say anything nice, you shouldn't say anything at all. Forgive me: I'm doing so for specific and I think useful reasons.

There aren't very many photographs of St Ives Museum here, for a very good reason: there shouldn't really be any. Once upon a time, museums didn't like visitors taking photographs, partly (so we used to say) for copyright reasons, partly because the light of camera flashes was bad for delicate objects. Now most museums, including the nationals, seem much more relaxed, except for special exhibitions which often include lots of articles the institution doesn't actually own; certainly modern digital cameras don't damage light-sensitive objects in the way older cameras may have done. However, St Ives Museum makes it very, very clear that it doesn't want you taking snaps. It is very insistent on this as on other points, that visitors should not touch things, nor should they lean on the glass of display cases; and, in case you may have overlooked the instructions, it reminds you of them in labels every six feet or so. These are all very reasonable things for a museum to ask its visitors, but nowhere else I have ever called in on feels a need to impress such injunctions on its patrons' awareness with the same rigour and determination, as though they were a matter of life and death.

Reader: I rebelled.

But I only rebelled in circumstances where I seemed unlikely to risk anyone's wrath, which is why there aren't many images here. Call me coward.

Having visited St Ives for many, many years, I couldn't recall ever going into the Museum, and having toiled up the steps into the somewhat unprepossessing building I understood why. The Museum's site has housed a pilchard curing cellar, a laundry, a variety of Christian societies, a pottery and a cinema, before the collection of the Old St Ives Society was moved here in 1968 and expanded thereafter, and the structure is designed for utility, not beauty. That's not the issue: it's the displays that are a little *retro*. The visitor is greeted by a roomful of dark wood display cases rather like the more antique sections of the Natural History Museum in South Ken, and explores a variegated and not-always contextualised landscape of local paraphernalia (why is there a shelf of old electrical plugs?), during which time she is badgered from room to room by those

everpresent hectoring labels. My favourite item was a rather wonderful collection of photographs of the little fishing borough, mounted on fading beige hessian boards of a kind that made me assume at first that the display had remained unaltered since the Museum opened: I boggled a bit on realising that it had in fact been updated relatively recently before my visit. I think the *coup de grace* was the blue tarpaulin screening some of the windows: I'm not sure that's a very effective anti-UV filter, no matter how cheap it may be.

Friends: I am not, NOT, advising you to steer clear of St Ives Museum. Every local museum (or every one I've visited) is worth while and should be supported, and St Ives's is no different: it has a lot of lovely stuff and that pattern of chains you can see below is rather beautiful, isn't it? It couldn't half do with a bit of love, though, some of it tough.



8. The Old Guildhall & Gaol Museum, Looe, Autumn 2013

Founded: 1974

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history



Very often half the pleasure in visiting a small local museum (or sometimes more of it) comes from the building it's set in. This is definitely the case with Looe, where the Old Guildhall and Gaol is the location for the little museum which sits in the centre of this tiny Cornish fishing borough of tangled streets and (now) seaside emporia and chip shops. Once upon a time it was the Town Hall and Borough Magistrates' Court for, not Looe exactly, but the borough of *East Looe*, which was administratively completely separate from the township of *West Looe* on the opposite bank of

the river. This stone structure, dating back to the fifteenth century in parts, is genuinely as old as the town thinks it is, which isn't always the case with such cherished buildings. Visitors clamber up and down cranky staircases below and within a timber-roofed hall at the far end of which is the resplendent black oak 18th-century magistrates' bench surmounted by a gloriously OTT coat of arms, enough to put the fear of God into any miscreant. You marvel that such an attempt at grandeur can be crammed into such a tiny space. The collection is equally eccentric and one could, should one want, spend hours here looking at every fossil, lobster pot, mermaid's purse or fisherman's caul, and flicking through album upon album of local snaps and newspaper cuttings. It's all really rather wonderful.



9. Lawrence House Museum, Launceston, Spring 2014

Founded: some time before 1950

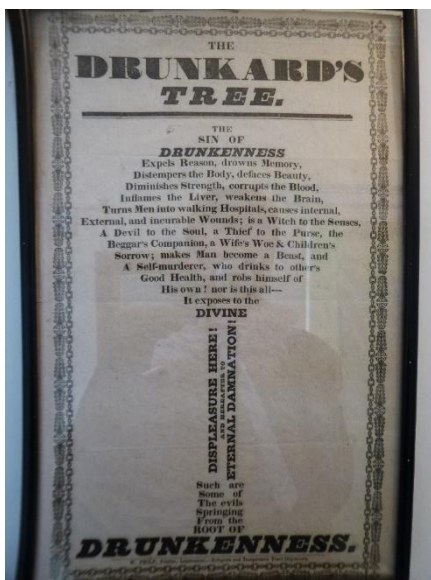
Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

Launceston, the one-time County Town of Cornwall, is the sort of place which should have a lot of history but which doesn't quite make the best of it: it didn't help that we visited on a damp early-closing afternoon when even the grandiose parish church was locked up. Lawrence House is owned by the National Trust but leased to the Town Council, and coming into the museum feels a little like being an interloper in someone else's home. The effect is particularly acute when you find yourself in the Mayor's Parlour, a room which still performs that civic function on occasion.

As one often finds in small local museums, the collection isn't organised around a historical scheme, but the galleries are randomly arranged according to what happens to be in the collection, in this case a gathering of general local history material plus a display about Launceston's 'famous sons' [sic]. I see that the charming juxtapositions and arrangements I chose to photograph, from a descent of hats to antique books to a parade of old vacuum cleaners, were completely different from the things the Museum itself would like to highlight as displayed on its website, and the whole building was closed for repair during the covid pandemic, which may have been the occasion for a complete overhaul of the galleries, who knows.





Both the delights and frustrations of Launceston's collection are epitomised by a display case containing a chunk of bone: it is, so a label tells us, what remains of 'The Screaming Skull of Tresmarrow'. But what *was* the Screaming Skull of Tresmarrow? Whose skull was it, what was it doing at Tresmarrow, and why did it scream? There is nothing to tell us! How *can* you toy with us this way?

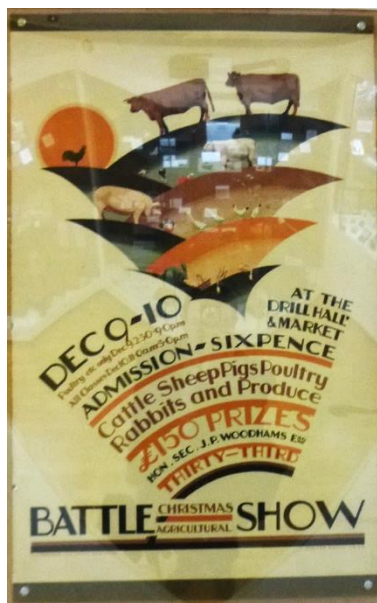
(In fact, it's that clerical spinner-of-yarns Fr Sabine Baring-Gould who tells the skull's tale in his 1913 *Book of Folk-lore*: 'All recollection of whose it was had passed away', he says, continuing 'One of the Dawes [Tresmarrow's owners], disliking its presence, had it buried, but thereupon ensued such an uproar, such mighty disturbances, that it was on the morrow dug up again and replaced in its recess. The Dawe family, when they sold Tresmarrow, migrated to Canada, and have taken the skull with them.' So what's it doing in the museum? I wonder if it still screams, or even mutters in irritation at its current confinement.)

10. Battle Local History Museum, Summer 2014

Founded: 1953

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history



In classic fashion, the Battle Historical Society was formed in the wake of the 1951 Festival of Britain, and opened its first museum in 1953. After a bit of wandering about it ended up in its current home, the Almonry, which it shares with Battle Town Council.

The whole history of Battle is so dominated by 1) its Abbey and 2) its, well, battle, that it's not easy for anything else to get a word in edgeways. The little Local History Museum naturally doesn't neglect those aspects of the town's past, but it does its best to include a variety of other things as well. As frequently happens the age of the building is often overestimated - one website claims it dates to 1090 while the Royal Commission

on Historic Monuments insists it's probably 15th-century - but although the Museum seems very proud of its home (and its pleasant accompanying garden) the displays don't tell you anything much about it. Instead, the

collection, which all fits in one long, barn-like room, comprises the usual sort of heterogeneous memorabilia you tend to associate with a small market town, with a couple of nice, eccentric highlights. ‘Small face in clay, undated and unidentified’ is a museological masterstroke.



11. Time & Tide, Great Yarmouth, Autumn 2014

Founded: 2012

Governance: LA-supported trust

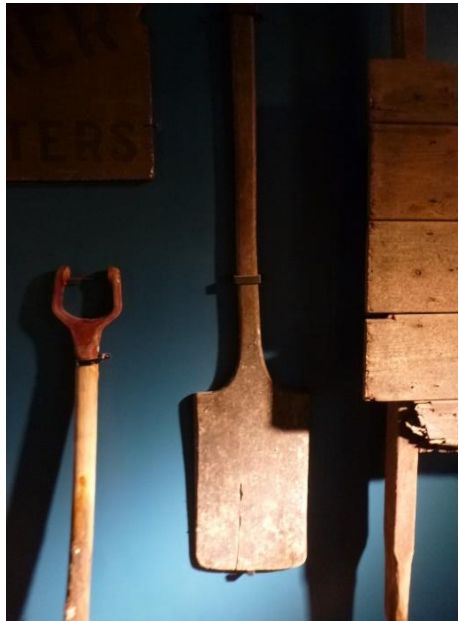
Scope: Local history, fishing industry

One of the newer museums in this collection and one of the bigger, Time & Tide is part of the mighty Norfolk Museums Service, a long-standing co-operative venture between the local authorities in the county - for the time being, anyway. It's new(ish), on the pricey side, and has a glossy café and sprawling shop from which I bought my usual set of postcards and, somewhat metareferentially, a book of poems about museums. The site is a

little out of the way, in a side street some distance from the brash seafront part of the town, which is melancholy or chaotic depending on the season. This does no more than reflect the history of the town, divided between the venerable seafaring settlement riddled with alleyways or 'Rows', and the more self-assertive resort that grew up later, facing the sea rather than the harbour. The Museum occupies a former herring warehouse (what else could it be?) and contains a great mass of fascinating stuff that reflects quite nicely every aspect of Yarmouth's history.

Archaeology and the herring trade come first; there is a room full of model ships; there is a variety of fishing kit. I am not overly interested in this subject, but it gave a very vivid insight into the growth of the town whose sheer prosperity in the Middle Ages and subsequently I wasn't at all aware of, nor how it all rested on the superabundant shoals of little silvery fish. Other galleries cover the holiday trade and more recent town life (and what the locals think about it). There's an odd smattering of ethnographic clutter – spooky South Sea masks and a mummy's hand – which were brought home by Yarmouth sailors and found their way to the Home for Seafarers before washing up in the Museum collection. The most charismatic part of the displays is a reconstructed slum Row, complete with washing lines and grimy lamps: you are supposed to be able to get there, but I couldn't work out how, and could only glimpse it from above.





12. Ancient House Museum of Thetford Life, Autumn 2014

Founded: 1924

Governance: LA-supported trust

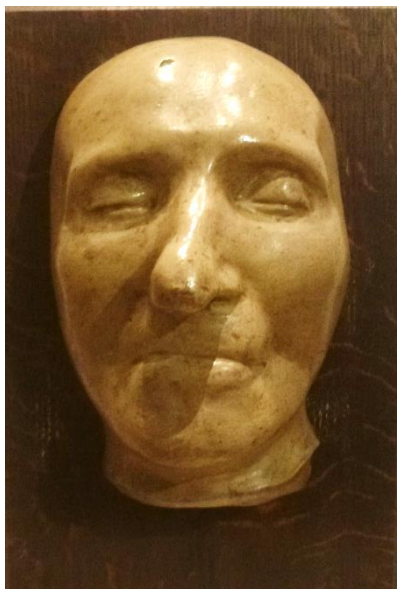
Scope: Local history

Another site belonging to the great Norfolk Museums Service, Ancient House is, if not exactly ancient, certainly *venerable* with its 15th-century origins. It was transformed from a pair of shops to a museum thanks to the good offices of that extraordinary figure Prince Frederick Duleep Singh, archaeologist, antiquary, and son of the last Sikh Maharajah. Prince Frederick bought the Ancient House (as it would become) and presented it to the Corporation of Thetford as the town's museum.

Within, the museum's air is redolent with the scent of old wood and smoke; timber-framing is visible everywhere and several of the ground floor rooms are arranged to display the fabric of the house as the main exhibit to which the artefacts are just illustration. The layout is the first test the visitor faces, as you must initially find your way to the 'front desk' which is actually towards the back, and from there they tell you how to navigate the building. Thetford's two most famous sons, the aforementioned Prince Frederick and 18th-century radical pamphleteer and campaigner Tom Paine, whose death mask you can see in the photos, both feature in the displays, an incongruous couple in all sorts of ways.

One other peculiarity of Thetford Museum is that many of the labels - at least when I visited - exhibit a copy-writing technique we were introduced to when I did my Museum Studies training at Leicester University thirty years ago. It probably has a name, but that's by-the-by. The idea is to compose display text in short sentences, minimising subordinate clauses, and starting every new sentence on a new line. It's supposed to produce accessible text, but is in fact incredibly hard to do and what you produce can end up reading like a strange kind of museological *haiku*. I had a go at it at High Wycombe (no chance to do it at Wimborne or Chatham) and soon abandoned it. It was odd to see it still going strong at Thetford - in 2014, anyway.

My favourite artefacts in the Ancient House were easily the colossal Mannerist busts of the Roman emperors Otho and Tiberius which originated in Italy but for some peculiar reason ended up gracing the frontage of a Thetford theatre. Otho looks as though he has not only eaten all the pies, but possibly the baker as well.



13. Sheringham Museum, Autumn 2014

Founded: 1986

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history, fishing industry, lifeboats

Yet another illustration of the huge variety that can be found in Britain's local museums, Sheringham started out being housed in a fairly typical manner in a row of cottages, before it was compelled by its growing collection of lifeboats to move to an ex-Anglian Water building on the seafront of this little former fishing town on the North Norfolk coast. The building is now rather oddly called The Mo after 'a little girl who lived in Sheringham over 130 years ago' (what names did they reject? The Freda? The Gertie?); it is jaw-droppingly ugly and looms threateningly over anyone making their way up the path towards it, but having only been opened in 2010 it was spanking new when I went there, and was down to undergo another refurbishment in 2016 - a revamp again driven by necessity, the building not being terribly well-laid-out for museum purposes.

Despite that decidedly unprepossessing first approach, the place is rather splendid once you get inside. Naturally the sea features large in the collection and galleries and when I visited they were still displaying the last few remnants of a major exhibition of fishermen's jerseys, or *ganseys* as they call them in these parts; it may not mean much to anyone less than *au fait* with knitwear but the sheer visual impact of these aeronautic pullovers is unforgettable. The same might be said of the lifeboats and fishing boats which unavoidably occupy much of the museum space: you don't need that much interest in or knowledge of either fishing or sea rescue to have your imagination piqued by these charismatic objects in which people have spent so much time and struggled with the elements. Upstairs the rough work of fishing gives way to the more genteel incarnation of Sheringham as a holiday destination, with some gorgeous Victorian costume and a fun little hotel tea-table arrangement which tells you so much in one image. You can, all these delights having been sampled, top them off by ascending the tower to the entirely separate Sheringham Shoal Wind Farm Visitor Centre. This is an excitingly bleak, concrete-floored room with views out across the swelling North Sea to the eponymous wind farm just visible on the horizon, and a range of displays telling you how and why it was built. Corporate propaganda it may essentially be, but it says something very important about the life and landscape, or seascape, of this community. Which is what a museum should do.



14. Horsham Museum & Art Gallery, Summer 2015

Founded: 1893

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history

The elegant lime-green frontage of 9 Causeway in Horsham houses one of the most heterogeneous collections I can recall seeing in a local museum -

there's a bit of everything, and quite a lot of some surprising things, generously distributed around no fewer than 26 rooms. The Museum grew out of an initiative by members of the Free Christian Church on the Worthing Road, and had a couple of homes over the years before arriving at Causeway House in 1939, from which point it was under the aegis of the County (and later District) Council - rather early for a shift of that kind, and one which has not yet been reversed in the current chilly climate for local authority museums.

Given the very professional way the Museum runs its business, and its website, it's a surprise to find how jumbly the many, many galleries are - you get very little sense of the development of Horsham as a place, still less of the personality of the building which houses the collection. It may be that the history of many of the artefacts is lost so there's not much to say about them. What you do get are some very imaginative set-pieces and delightful juxtapositions of the kind that are such an amusing discovery in local museum displays. The shrine to the poet Shelley (local lad) is quite stunning: it really does look shrine-like, and there is a display of open books looking for all the world like poetical butterflies waiting to take flight. There is a nice Cabinet of Curiosities which neatly combines the spooky and the charismatic. Upstairs we find a very bizarre ethnographic collection (relics of the careers of various retired colonels across the Empire and further) and we are also offered a roomful of horse furniture displayed in black toplit cabinets as though it was the most glamorous of jewellery.





15. Rotunda Museum, Scarborough, Autumn 2015

Founded: 1823

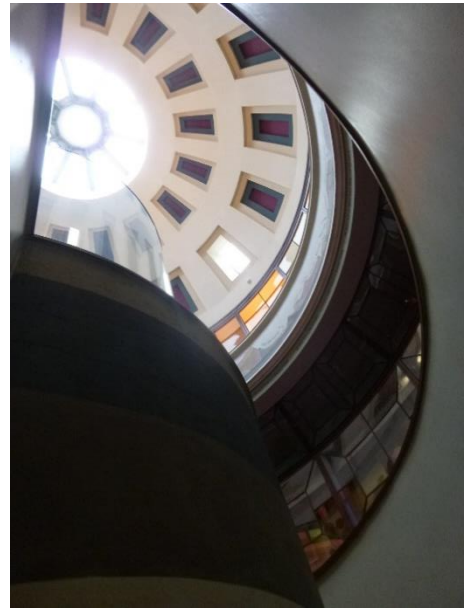
Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Geology & palaeontology, plus some local history

It was a chill and foggy morning when I arrived in Scarborough and went looking for the museum. ‘Is there a local history museum in Scarborough?’ I asked the young woman on duty at the front desk in the Rotunda. ‘No, this is it’, she replied helpfully. I hesitated a bit as, truth be told, I am interested in rocks only to a very limited extent, but decided to carry on beyond the shop, and was glad I did.

The Rotunda is a wonderful relic of a bygone age. A grandiose and breathtakingly ugly Classical drum of Harkness stone, it sits above the gardens and gazes out to the North Sea, when that’s visible, which it wasn’t when I was there. It owes its existence to William Smith, whose insight that the same rocks contained the same sorts of fossils and could thus be dated by stratification opened the way to the modern science of geology; released from debtor’s prison, Smith came to Scarborough, where the local landscape provided him with ample scope to explore his ideas. Smith secured local patronage and set up the Scarborough Geological Society which gathered the collection and arranged the construction of the Museum to house it.

But it’s still just rocks. Or it would be without a massive restoration and refurbishment programme in 2006-8 which produced a museum full of delight and fascination, and striking beauty. An ‘orientation’ gallery with some animated films which are a bit *disorientating* for anyone over the age of 12 leads into a primeval realm of fibreglass dinosaurs and real specimens (including a relatively recently-discovered plesiosaur skeleton), and then you ascend to the great glory of the Rotunda - the dome gallery. Lined with its original restored Victorian display cabinets, the dome houses not just geological and palaeontological specimens but machine models, looted relics of Empire, portraits of Yorkshire scientific dignitaries, and a violin. Above the tiered cases is the dome itself, from which light gently filters like a fall of feathers past coloured glass. It’s so beautiful it brings tears to the eyes, and I only regret I can’t give you more than a hint of it here. This is more than just rocks. This is rocks made to sing *angelically*.



16. Filey Museum, Autumn 2015

Founded: 1971

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history



A somewhat shy institution, Filey Museum. I wandered around several streets following what I thought was the right direction and missed it completely, having to ask directions. The building was in fact a pair of cottages in a whitewashed terrace, and you have to look out for a large lamp and the rather more reticent sign on the wall to show the way in. There is also a very strange black-and-white stone plaque over the other door reading '1696 IMN THE FEAR OF GOD BE IN YOU' which is doubtless sound spiritual advice but helps not a whit in orientation.

As well as shy it's also very gentle and homely, and the visitor has the distinct impression of wandering around someone's cottage home, at least on the ground floor where there is a parlour and old-fashioned kitchen with all the accoutrements common to such displays - washboards and herb-choppers and antimacassars on the armchairs. So as not to disturb the visual impression, information that might normally appear on labels is instead relayed via a recorded voice-over. If your experience is anything like mine the helpful attendant at the front desk will come and turn them on for you – whether you like it or not. Not surprisingly the presence of the sea bulks large in the history of this former fishing town and therefore in the Museum collection too, with lifeboat memorabilia and a reconstructed fish baiting shed in the garden, which I got quite excited about until realising that it was just a mock-up. The other aspect of Filey is as a seaside resort and that appears in the Museum in the form of adverts and posters. The items I found hardest to take were an extraordinary series of knitted dolls illustrating historical characters; perhaps children like them. What I remember more, though, are the objects and images that bear quiet testimony to the lives and experiences of working people.



17. Hornsea Museum, Autumn 2015

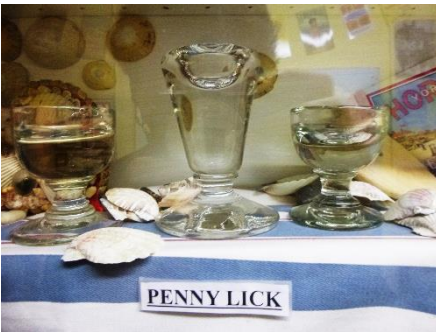
Founded: 1978

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

It was partly its resemblance to the Priest's House in Wimborne that made Hornsea my favourite among the East Yorkshire museums I saw in 2015. Not only is it housed in an historic building in a small town centre and has the same sort of stuff in its collection, but the sterling volunteers who run it did what we did at Wimborne and thought about the history of the building and how it relates to that of the town around it. It originated perhaps in the sixteenth century as a farmhouse, much extended and amended as the centuries have gone by, and in the mid-1900s was divided into shops and cottages. Some of this is reflected in the displays, most notably the tenancy of the Burn family who lived here from the late 1600s to World War Two, succeeded by 'a glamorous lady of meretricious repute' and a Mr & Mrs Audas. Several of the rooms reflect its domestic occupation, others its one-time incarnation as a working farm, and some its commercial tenants. The outbuildings house dairy and workshop displays and a little mocked-up street with four shop windows packed with chemist's jars and the like (you can't lose with chemist's jars, as many small museums well know).

Then there is a doorway which leads into a separate display about Hornsea Pottery. I have next to no interest in ceramics, at least the commercial items the Hornsea Pottery made, some of which you can see in the photos below. But what the Museum does is tell the story of this once-vital local employer with an intense focus which is revealing and fascinating. The gentlemen who started it up got into pottery from doing clay modelling as therapy while recovering from war injuries in the 1940s, and the original kiln sits in the gallery (at the end, interestingly). The display describes the firm's experimentation with forms and products, its expansion, and long battle to keep afloat in an increasingly hostile economy, being bought out by this and that bigger company and stumbling upon the one thing that was going to save it before something else going horribly wrong, and eventually ceasing to trade. The insight the gallery brings into the relationship between craft, entrepreneurship and international late-capitalism is actually quite radical and not something I expected to discover at all. It goes to show just what museums can do with imagination and a bit of cash.



18. Beck Isle Museum, Pickering, Autumn 2015

Founded: 1967

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

Beck Isle Museum is splendidly located in a big Georgian house with rambling outbuildings on a green beside the flowing waters of the Pickering Beck which runs past beneath a gorgeous old bridge. It is, as its website tells you, ‘deceptively big’ and is packed with a great variety of stuff, although once I was past the welcome board consisting of a Bo-Peep-type Victorianish little girl in a bonnet and discovered how much the entrance charge was, I did hesitate before taking the plunge and going in. This is another museum that has wonderful opportunities in its setting and collection which it doesn’t exploit *quite* as much as it could: the history of the house and its inhabitants feature almost not at all and Pickering itself is nearly absent from the displays; the promise of the glorious printer’s workshop downstairs is rather unfulfilled. Upstairs we have a mock street-scene of the



sort pioneered in this country by York Castle Museum thirty years and more before the museum society of Pickering got going with Beck Isle; but, with a couple of exceptions, the recreated shops don’t represent actual Pickering businesses, fun though they may be. My favourite, the gents’ outfitters, does apparently have some Pickering precedent. The best bit of local colour comes in the display about the nearby mines you find in one of the outbuildings. Nevertheless, turn after turn brings a glimpse of something amusing and intriguing. The ‘Mementoes of the Cropton Lane Murders’ are impressively desperate: a framed group of twigs.





19. Godalming Museum, Autumn 2015

Founded: 1921

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

Until a refurb during the pandemic year, Godalming Museum was virtually invisible to the outside world: visitors entered through a door wedged between a sports shop and a delicatessen, and along a shining little corridor a bit like an airlock giving access to another space entirely. Now the entrance is a bit more obvious and slightly less quirky. This is a relatively well-heeled part of the world and small though it is the Museum looks as though a fair amount has been spent on keeping it up to date; and it manages to offer some beautiful arrangements of objects set within a slightly crazy old building in which beams and timber frame appear at unexpected angles. The first of the upstairs rooms had just been refurbished when I first went with a whistle-stop introduction to the town and its history and, thanks to a grant from the V&A, the Museum had managed to purchase local stained-glass artist Rachel Mulligan's gorgeous 'Labours of the Months' sequence, resplendently displayed in the window. One of the welcome aspects of the display is that there's no attempt to pretend that Godalming has always been a quaint little market town: in fact until about 40 years ago it was more of a centre of light industry and such it is presented here (although its role as a commuter settlement gets less of a look-in). Gertrude Jekyll's gardening boots and trowel are off in a side room, but frustratingly hard to photograph. Godalming Museum also has the distinction of being the only historical collection where I have unexpectedly come across a photograph of myself, not in the gallery of local personalities illustrated here, but in a shot of the reopening of a cemetery chapel a couple of years ago!





20. Midhurst Museum, Autumn 2015

Founded: 2011

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Random stuff!

I was sceptical about Midhurst Museum's online claim to be 'possibly the smallest museum in the world' as it's the kind of thing some institutions take a great pride in. Back home in Dorset we had the 'smallest pub in Britain', the Smiths' Arms at Godmanstone, for instance, which depends how you define a pub; or there's St Beuno's Culborne in Devon, 'the smallest church in Britain', which depends how you define a church. Then I arrived at Midhurst and discovered the hyperbole was probably true. For a moment I didn't realise the tiny unit in an indoor shopping arcade was it. The building in Knockmarket Hundred used to be a garage and the brothers who owned and ran it have amassed a vast collection of historic bits and pieces that are kept in a series of enormous sheds somewhere; when the garage was converted into commercial units, including a cafe upstairs among the wooden beams and rafters, the Museum was set up in a burst of voluntary enthusiasm. There is just about sufficient room between the custodian sat on a wooden chair, a rack of books and leaflets of historic interest, and the two display cases, for you to turn around and look at whatever happens to be on show: a swung cat would cause severe disruption. I gather someone from the museum society goes to the brothers' sheds of stuff and selects a theme for the coming month's exhibition, rummaging around to find what might illustrate it. When I went it was Concorde, and some Cadbury's tins. I believe the brick is the only permanent exhibit. I bought a postcard, popped a couple of quid into the donations box (which I think was a brass shell case, I can't quite remember), producing an alarmingly loud rattle, and left, marvelling.



21. Jersey Museum, Spring 2016

Founded: not sure

Governance: Publicly-funded independent trust

Scope: Local history

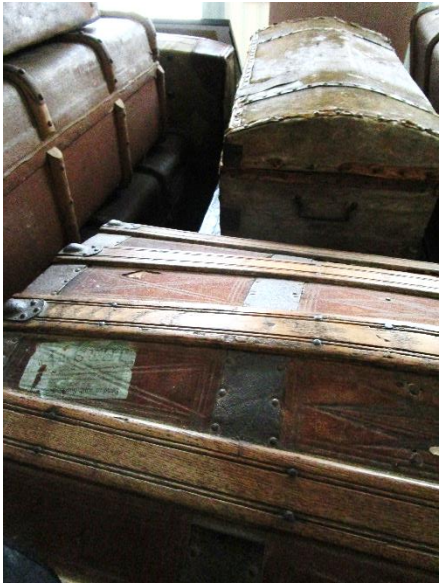
In the right light, the Museum building, with its top-floor cream-coloured loggia, looks a bit like it belongs in Portmeirion. It's part of Jersey Heritage, a catch-all trust whose portfolio includes castles and other attractions as well as the Museum itself. You enter the Museum through a generous foyer, a bit on the dark side, like going into a cinema; our next turn was to take the splendid Jamaican mahogany stairs into the Merchant's House next door to the Museum building proper, beautifully refurbished and reconstructed to illustrate the lives of the people who inhabited it at the moment in 1869 when the paterfamilias, Dr Ginestet, and his family left after the failure of his homeopathic medical practice, and fled to France to escape debt. It looks really good, although there's not much in the way of orientation and context.

Back in the Museum itself, we found a few heterogeneous and unexplained bits and pieces on a stairwell and were just wondering how rewarding this somewhat pricey experience was actually going to be when we entered the world of 'Ice Age Island', an exploration of the formation not just of Jersey but of the British Isles more widely. It looked good and one should hope so, as it was partly devised by the Natural History Museum in London; it was



also, at least as far as I was concerned, only partly comprehensible, but a floor below brought us to the Story of Jersey which is a much more orthodox local history gallery. It's very neatly put together, dealing with a lot within a not all that expansive space. We thought the cigar-store Scotsman was probably being depicted in the process of taking snuff. I thought the most charismatic object was Chevalier's Diary, a 17th-century manuscript battered, beaten, and yet surviving to bring the Stuart governor's words down four hundred years. That's Lilly Langtry's nicely-understated

dressing case you can see in the first snap. I'm not saying that's as moving, somehow.



22. Tilford Rural Life Collection, Spring 2016

Founded: 1973

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Vernacular architecture

Framley Museum, like the *Framley Examiner* newspaper from which it grew, is a spoof, but the statement on its website that “The museum was founded in 1882 when objects of local interest began to gather in the field where the museum now stands, due to the natural action of the wind and rain”, might strike the visitor wandering around the extensive site of the Rural Life Centre at Tilford as applying there as well. In fact it was all a bit more deliberate than that. The idea of rescuing buildings that illustrate vanishing ways of life, especially rural, ‘folk’ life, and re-erecting them in open-air museum settings, started in Scandinavia a very long while ago. The idea was transplanted to Britain at such institutions as the National Welsh Folk Museum at St Fagans (1948) and the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum (1967). What began life as the Old Kiln Museum at Tilford, founded by Mr & Mrs Jackson, was a bit of a latecomer in the field, and always had more local ambitions, its collection consisting of a variety of buildings from the few miles immediately around. Nowadays these are enlivened by a small light railway which chuffs around the site, a steamroller, and a smattering of animals for children and others to coo over.



It has to be said that after a strong start with a post-war prefab - I'd never been in to one before, and visiting Tilford's was a decidedly odd experience - things were not looking good. The whole area around the Old Kiln itself needed a bit of attention: its displays of gently rusting farm equipment and bewildering labels were a little taxing even to the interested. We went on an

excursion to the relatively new WWII Polish refugee camp and, though you could see what they were getting at, that was a wee bit flat as well. But the experience picked up when we met one of the volunteers at the very newest exhibit, a cycle repair shop from Frimley Green, redolent with the aroma of grease and oil (and the shop, ho-ho). Thereafter we found the buildings increasingly atmospheric and the colossal collections of stuff in the shed-like display galleries fascinating if somewhat overwhelming. I had no idea eggs were once sold in wayside vending machines by a group of farmers rebelling against the Egg Marketing Council, but having now seen one of the mechanisms in the flesh my life will never be the same. We had some pretty nice cake at the end of the visit, too, quite worn out with rural bygones and peopling the buildings with imaginary residents.



23. Arundel Museum, Summer 2016

Founded: 1964

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

Peering past the reception desk of Arundel Museum I was a little dismayed to see that the whole thing was basically one room, albeit a moderately large one, with a temporary exhibition gallery off on one side - and *that* was shut. It was a wee bit pricey for that: not a problem for a singleton who almost always visits museums no matter what, but perhaps more off-putting for a family. However, this one room turned out to comprise one of the best local museums I've visited. Given that there's only one paid member of staff who had nothing to do with the move of the museum to this site in 2012, and the whole redisplay was managed by volunteers, it really is very professional. The objects are beautifully laid out and the history of the town is described with a clarity and definition that some better-resourced collections should envy. Those objects aren't perhaps anything very special (apart from some of the items relating to Arundel's former life as a port - the barge rudder is really a rather charismatic piece) but they're arranged with such an aesthetic sensitivity and placed so very firmly into the context of the community and its changing nature over time that they seem to add up to something more. I didn't know Arundel had been such a centre for maritime trade once; the role of the Castle in the town's identity is covered in a subsidiary keep-like enclave in the middle of the gallery; and the decline of the port and the emergence of tourism and antiques-trading gets a mention when in so many museums the recent history of the community they're supposed to be examining doesn't appear at all. Arundel today seems a prim, middle-class sort of place, but its museum isn't frightened of the truth at all. I think it's absolutely exemplary, and worth celebrating.





24. Blandford Town Museum, Summer 2016

Founded: 1974

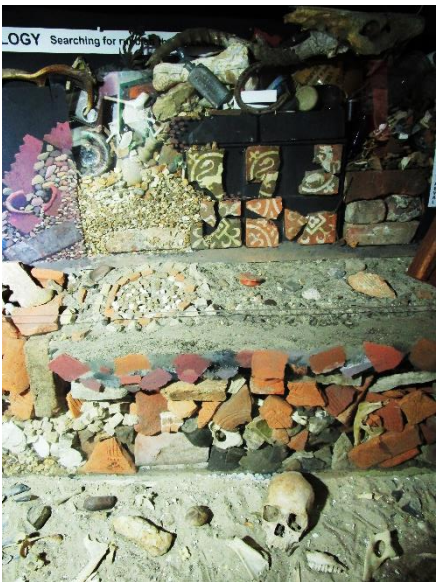
Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

The volunteers on duty at Blandford Museum weren't sure how to answer my gentle enquiries about the history of the nice old building that houses it. One said it used to be a stables, the other that it was the workshop of the Bastard brothers, the architects chiefly responsible for rebuilding the small Dorset market town after the catastrophic fire of 1731. Of course it could easily have been both.

The collection is pretty much the usual sort of thing one would expect (including a serpent! It doesn't get any better than that), with the exception of the little display about the Gurkhas and Nepalese culture which you discover tucked away into a far corner of the upper floor: Blandford owes that to the Royal Signals Corps who are based over the hill from the old town centre. The museum is all amiably random although I thought the

medieval corner and the nicely grim archaeological stratigraphy display had a great deal of flair to them.



25. Dales Countryside Museum, Hawes, Autumn 2016

Founded: 1976

Governance: Public body

Scope: Local history

In common with many small towns across England, Hawes used to have a railway station, and this building, helpfully extended and remodelled, is what houses the Dales Countryside Museum, administered by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and thus rather better-resourced than the volunteer-organised museums in the towns round about it. One might therefore reasonably demand a bit more of its display standards and, thankfully, this is what one finds.

I arrived a minute or two before the museum was due to open, and so I poked around outside, discovering on this damp morning a forlorn and gently rusting steam engine, a disassembled mill wheel which the museum was trying to raise the money to re-erect, and the rather sprucer railway carriages which have a new incarnation as an activity centre for child visitors. Inside the building, though, was a different matter.

The museum has decided to root its exploration of Dales life in the material things of the landscape, in Stone, Water, Earth, Metal, and Wood, and right by the entrance desk you are introduced to these primal themes in the form of five monumental pillars containing relevant objects. I like this kind of approach - it's clear and definite and allows visitors without much time to look at absolutely everything to apprehend 'the story'. From here you follow the trail around to the right into a lead mine - I had no idea how important lead mining had been to the Dales, an industry which collapsed in the mid-1800s to the extent that the local population halved over the course of about a decade after 1870 - and the various crafts and services which facilitated village life; and then you go upstairs into a set of displays about farming, which helpfully contrast the way things used to be organised with the current situation. I hadn't quite appreciated how useful a slaughtered pig can be. The element I found most moving was the mocked-up surgery of Dr Bainbridge, the first member of his farming family to have any kind of education and who qualified as a doctor at Durham in the very early 1900s. He then returned to his home village where he spent the rest of his life as the only medic for miles: general practitioner, surgeon, pharmacist and

midwife rolled into one. On the door hung his graduate's gown. God bless you, Isaac Bainbridge, I thought, grumpy bugger though you looked.

Completely separate from all that was an art installation, words that usually make my heart sink a bit, but which turned out to be splendid. You entered through a dark passageway to the sound of whispered words and a slow, insistent drumbeat into a great space punctuated with small illuminated arrangements of stone, tree branches, and bones, and, against the curving wall by which you entered, a lit-up circle of animal skin, or what appears to be animal skin. This was called 'Nature, Skin, and Bone', a collaboration between a sculptor and a light artist, and I found it an affecting evocation of the human relationship with these primal things: it was like being plunged back into the mental landscape of the Stone Age, of human beings trying to make sense of the world around them and its threats and inescapable facts with, perhaps, half-glimpsed and barely-understood rituals and acts. A temporary but impactful pleasure.



26. Nidderdale Museum, Pateley Bridge, Autumn 2016

Founded: 1975

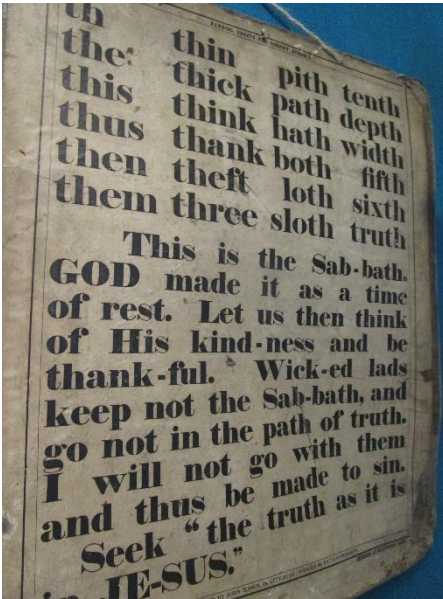
Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

They were terribly friendly at Pateley Bridge museum: would those in charge have been as welcoming when the building was a workhouse, or a magistrate's court, as portions of it were at periods in the past? That past is reflected at different points in the displays, which also boast an amazing variety of mannekins clearly pressganged from their former employment in department stores and clothes shops and refashioned into a kaleidoscope of guises. One of these figures is a young woman whose presence in the clothing display is not quite explained: she is without doubt the most catastrophically hung-over looking museum mannekin I've ever seen. She's just got up, she has no idea how the party ended or why she's wearing a corset many, many times too big for her, and all she knows is that she needs bacon and eggs and needs them *now*. More than one person has called attention to her resemblance to the late Amy Winehouse. Not far away from her, beyond the girl and young lad in 1920s bathing gear, is a lady in a print dress with Babycham at her side, a quintessence of life circa 1960.

Be that as it may, Nidderdale Museum takes the old-fashioned view that you should pack as much as you possibly can into a museum display, and its approach is maximalist in the extreme. Beyond its serpentine rail, the Victorian Room contains more even than any real Victorian drawing room could have done; drums menace you from above in a corridor, as there's nowhere else to put them. There is a mocked-up hairdressers' that looks like some exotic torture chamber with 1960s decor, in a sort of island you circle round trying to see everything. It all makes sense, when it makes sense, only in parts, but it's done with such indefatigable charm that you can't possibly object. Back in the '90s it won an award for 'the museum that does most with least' and that accolade seems not unjust. There is one point (at least) of tremendous museological flair when the mirrored doors at the end of the lead-mining display swing open to reveal the way out. It is, it cannot be denied, huge fun.





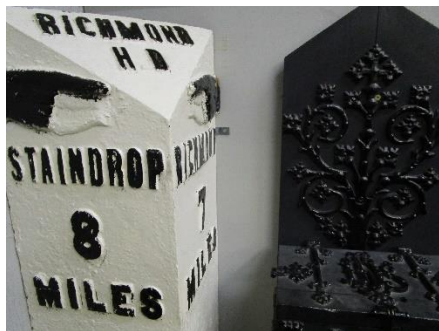
27. Museum of Richmondshire, Autumn 2016

Founded: 1974

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

The title of the museum – *Richmondshire* and not *Richmond* – is not a misnomer as it doesn't really cover that much of the history of the town as such. For an insight, for instance, into the relationship between town and Castle – the first owes its existence to the second – you have to go to the little 'museum' at the Castle itself, although that isn't much of a museum as it doesn't have a lot in the way of objects. The focus of the *town's* museum is rather broader.

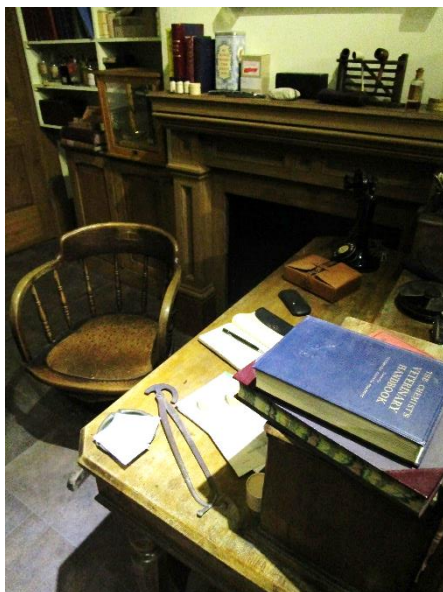
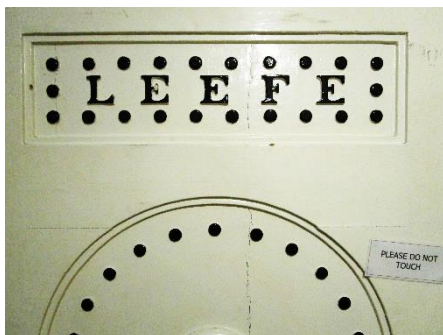


Sort of. The first question I was asked (apart from 'have you ever visited us before?' which you get asked everywhere) was whether I'd like to watch a ten-minute film about the town and its history. I said yes, as I am up for most things, though I was pretty sure in the event that it was longer than ten minutes and my energy was flagging well

before the end. 'In this film you will see several Mayors,' the Mayor told his viewers, 'rest assured that we only elect one at a time.' Well, thank goodness for that. The purpose of the video is not really to relate Richmond's history but to press home how heritage-conscious its public authorities are, which is, in itself, not a bad thing.

As so often happens, the building in which the Museum is situated looks interesting, but you don't get any information about it - although the area where you sit to watch the filmic exploits of Mayors past contains some reused crucks and timbers from a building elsewhere in the area, and you are told about that. As for the rest, it's a miscellaneous gathering of themes and items, with Roman archaeology cheek-by-jowl with a display about the long-lost local railway, and a pretty good mock-up of a Victorian shop nudging the very informative material about the once-mighty lead-mining industry of the Dales. Pride of place goes to the area's James Herriot connections: the museum displays most of the surgery set from the television adaptation of the adventures of the Yorkshire vet (with an

endorsement by the author himself, albeit from 1984). It's presided over in terrifying fashion by a stuffed Jack Russell on a table, whose basilisk stare doesn't appear to put off child visitors as much as I would have thought. I liked the white-painted iron door with its sign requesting visitors not to touch (surely not for conservation reasons, as the sign is itself attached with blu-tack), and a corridor of prints of Richmond which you could easily miss as it lies behind a closed door leading to the toilets. It was here that I discovered the wonderful watercolour of 'battling belle' Miss Moore, a female boxer from the turn of the last century whose act culminated, to general public acclaim, in wrestling a bear, though I don't know whether she wore her splendid velvet outfit to do so.



28. The Novium, Chichester, Winter 2016/17

Founded: 1962

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history, archaeology

Founded in 1962, perhaps, but moved to this site in 2012 - and you can't miss it. Its old incarnation, Chichester District Museum, was a far more ordinary town museum, housed in the old corn mill in Little London lane, but The Novium is a shiny white box (or rather, a series of stacked boxes) designed by Keith Williams after a competition organised by RIBA. The move was intended to house and showcase a Roman bath complex, discovered here during the building of a new Post Office, and the building does rather ennoble a decidedly uninspiring street. Chichester, of course, likes to trade on its Roman past, and The Novium's name references that of the Roman city, Noviomagus.

And, being that increasingly rare thing, a local authority-run museum, it's free to go in. This is presumably why it was so busy on a dull and very chilly term-time Thursday afternoon in February. The new (when we went) exhibition about astronaut and local boy Tim Peake - which is very colourful and well done - was also presumably a draw at that moment.

Once through the reception area you are first introduced to the bathhouse, highlighted in a dark amphitheatre and illustrated by unobtrusive and impressionistic film projected massively against a wall: the Roman artefacts are displayed on the mezzanine overlooking it. The other local history objects are mainly housed in a gigantic, riotous and strangely beautiful cubic display case in another gallery, although the museum's collection must be substantially bigger than this. The sense of the development of the city is rather muted, but the history of the Land Settlement Association was new to me, and there are plenty of charismatic objects to admire even within this minimal selection. Look out for the little portraits of museum staff next to the objects they've chosen for the display: I can read the signs of mild mickey-taking all too well, boys and girls. There's a small and somewhat unwonted display about an 18th-century admiral (nevertheless it excited the small boys who shared the space with us - 'A sword!!'), and a landing area, looking over the rooftops to the Cathedral, which is turned into a feature in its own right: it provides a chill-out zone after the visual stimulation of the Tim Peake gallery. All good stuff, and shows you yet again how proper

resourcing can make a difference to a museum, and that museum make a difference to its locale.



29. Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro, Spring 2017

Founded: 1818

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history, geology, archaeology, natural history, art

The RCM was founded - before all the other museums in this selection - not to preserve the local history of an area, but to promote good practice and practical knowledge in its industries. At its core lie the documents of the attached Courtney Library and Sir Philip Rashleigh's collection of minerals which were of such importance to Cornwall's varied mining industry. The RCM is still governed by the Royal Cornish Institution which set it up, but as is often the way with such collections it's acquired a great variety of stuff over the course of the years: mine-owners weren't just interested in mines. Rashleigh himself was responsible for bringing to light the Trewhiddle Hoard of early Christian silverwork – disappointingly this is now in the British Museum, while the RCM just has copies. As well as local history, decorative and fine art, and stuffed birds, there are bits of Roman and ancient Egyptian paraphernalia, and really all sorts of wonderful old tat. There's a little bit of everything you might desire in a museum.

That means it's a bit hard to display, though. Everywhere you turn there are gorgeous things to catch the eye, but drawing the whole collection together is a big ask, arguably an impossible one. The one thing that doesn't emerge very strongly from the displays is the personality and nature of Cornwall itself, this very distinctive and proudly different part of the British Isles. The great atrium at the centre of the building is where you find the local history, but a sense of how this history locks into the landscape is a little unexplored.

That said, by the end of a morning's visit we were thoroughly museum-ed out: there is simply so much to look at. There were no fewer than four temporary exhibitions - a little display about a Georgian Cornish doctor in Nigeria, an art show about artists and the Cornish landscape, Cornwall in World War One, and the inevitable Poldark tie-in (which was actually quite good, anchoring the books and TV series in the reality of the society they were based in). I rarely take photographs of museum text alone, but I thought the graphics of the WWI display, 'Heart of Conflict', were masterful and moving. Each separate section of the permanent displays has its own

personality: the Rashleigh Collection looks a bit like an alternative version of the TARDIS control room. George Sherwood Hunter's 1897 painting *Jubilee Procession in a Cornish Village* absolutely takes the breath away; and, if you're familiar at all with that national anthem of Cornwall, Father Hawker's 'Song of the Western Men', I defy you to stand in front of the portrait of Bishop Trelawney without it running through your mind. 'And shall Trelawney live/Or shall Trelawney die ...'





30. Swanage Museum, Spring 2017

Founded: 1976

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

Opposite the parish church in Swanage is the Tithe Barn, and that's where the Museum used to be. I recall visiting it many years ago, so it existed at least in the mid-1980s - and what I remember is a very traditional local museum of old tools and bygones with little typed and hand-written labels. The Museum isn't at the Tithe Barn now, and it wasn't like that when I saw it again either.

Instead it occupies a rather less picturesque but somewhat more practical building on the seafront, that doesn't leak as much as the Tithe Barn did. Its red brick and glass fabric is not exactly extensive, leaving the museum collection positively jammed cheek-by-jowl into quite a tiny space. The abiding impression it leaves the visitor with is not just one of the profusion of stuff crammed in the displays but the remarkable variety of mannekins. Unlike 'the Amy Winehouse of Pateley Bridge' – q.v. – these seem to have been manufactured for the purpose. A stonemason stumbles around in a display case; a haughty lady gestures towards a jug she intends to purchase; a chap in specs looks as though he's about to be sick into a bucket but is in fact engaged in another business completely; a lady in a headscarf leans out of a window. In fact, when you glance up, the whole ceiling space resembles a sketch by MC Escher, each plane apparently emerging from a separate dimension and illustrating a different event. The use of the available area is remarkably creative. You don't necessarily get that much of a specific sense of Swanage's past: instead it's a bit like wandering into somewhere else, a

strange location caught some time between about 1890 and 1940, populated by a profusion of bizarre characters. I do like the spinning stone samples!

As with some other places, the covid pandemic gave Swanage Museum the chance for a complete refurb, and I expect all this has been swept away!





31. Portsmouth City Museum, Summer 2017

Founded: 1977

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history, art

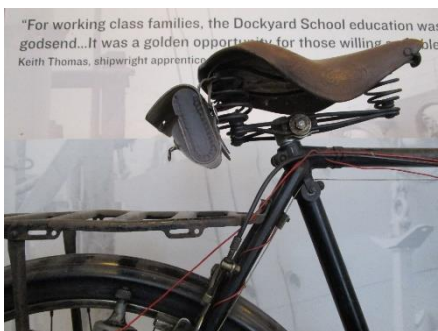
No museum I have ever visited has had so grim and forbidding a setting as Portsmouth Museum: you have to take your courage in your hands even to go up to the door. Once inside, I viewed the whitewashed staircases with their iron balustrades, and my guess was that the building had been a mental hospital. In fact it turns out to have been a barracks, an institutional setting of a different sort, and a madness of a different brand (says someone who once worked for the Army).

You might have thought that, Portsmouth being the city is, the leitmotif of the Museum would be the sea and seafaring, but the displays don't ambush you with boats and Heave-Ho-Me-Hearty as soon as you enter the galleries. Instead the first offering is an exhibit about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who apparently lived in Portsmouth for a bit but isn't someone I naturally associate with the place. Then you go up some stairs and find yourself in a series of room displays which give you an entrée into the history of Portsmouth proper, which is all fun though I would have liked more of an overview of the development of the town (I enjoy my maps). These culminate in a fantastically weird mocked-up café with a terrifying mannekin of a little girl having an ice cream. Beyond that is the completely random computer gaming room (at least it seemed random to me), which displays some primeval PCs from the 1980s and invites visitors to play antiquated video games at the consoles round the walls; and then, beyond *that*, we find the Portsmouth FC display. My interest in association football is barely visible to the naked eye, and yet I liked this: you can just picture thousands of souls making their way through the bright blue turnstile, just as in the Dockyard gallery you can be moved by the bike a dock worker rode to work each day for forty long years. Though the idea of Portsmouth as a developing settlement may be a little understated, the idea of it as a place to work - especially over most of the twentieth century - is very clear indeed. The rooms of art, fine and applied, provide visual palate-cleansers here and there. Out in the town (I didn't venture into the Dockyard area) you can follow a trail along a pattern of chains laid in stone in the pavements which takes you around most of the historic sites that survived the bombardment of World War Two, converting the centre of the

city into a sort of open-air museum in its own right, an atmospheric companion-piece to the indoors one.

I sat in the museum café enjoying a cup of tea and a brie-and-onion sandwich and felt very relaxed indeed for the first time in my week off: shame that I only had one day of it left. As well as Conan Doyle, another thing I don't associate with Portsmouth is corset-making, but one of the UK's leading firms in this area, Vollers, has been based in the city since the 1800s. As the display reticently points out, their clientele is a little different these days. Hello, sailor!





32. Lyme Regis Museum, Autumn 2017

Founded: 1901

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history, palaeontology

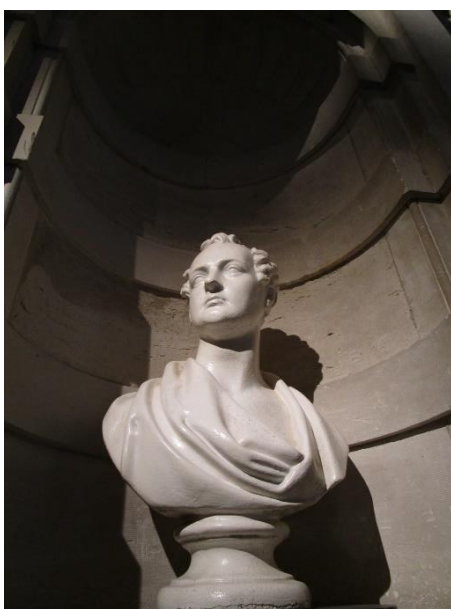
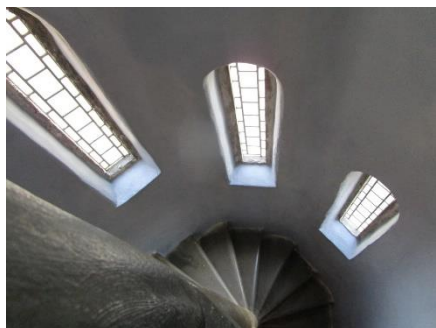
‘She sells sea shells by the sea shore’, so the tongue-twisting rhyme runs, allegedly composed in honour of pioneering palaeontologist and discoverer of the ichthyosaur Mary Anning, and here was where she sold them: the Museum was constructed on the site of her house, and of the shop the Anning family ran where Mary peddled her first fossils. She’s recently been commemorated further in the new ‘Mary Anning Wing’, a sleek glass extension to the Museum’s Victorian redbrick fabric, which houses the shop, entrance area, schools room and geology display, and whose great windows gaze out across the loveliness of Lyme Bay.

You are borne into the museum on a swirling cloud of ammonites, made from Coade stone and laid into the pavement outside the entrance (Eleanor Coade, the inventor of this powdered-stone marvel, was a Lyme resident). The geology displays are modern enough, but round the corner from them you are plunged into the old museum, a welter of miscellaneous local history material which does, almost despite itself, tell the story of Lyme quite effectively. There’s even a handwritten label or two, which are surely now museum pieces themselves. But the real star of Lyme Museum is the building. It has a crazy charisma which very few of its fellows can match. The central set-piece is a magnificent spiral staircase off which the galleries open like spikes firing off some kind of dreadful Baroque weaponry. This staircase curves round a column of stone and sits below a great bronze bell dangling from the cupola at the top of the building, has paintings around its walls and an inexplicable bust of Lord Byron in an alcove, and a strange stone entablature that says ‘NOTICES’ and looks like a Roman tombstone, yet contains not notices but another ammonite. The glorious eccentricity doesn’t stop there. In one of the rooms you have to go up green-painted iron steps onto an openwork gallery that runs around the bigger gallery. But it’s tiny. There’s barely room for people to pass each other. Off to one side of a landing is yet another, smaller spiral staircase.

This is, I imagine, a paradise for small children, who can tear around up and down stairs and cause gleeful havoc provided there are no studious grown-ups to disapprove. My visit to Lyme Museum started to take on a different flavour when 250 German teenagers turned up and began trying to negotiate

their way around the building via that wonderful but not exactly expansive staircase - I know there couldn't have been 250, but it felt like there were. Perhaps that's why the subsidiary staircase was put in. Go, and revisit your childhood, and run up and down, and up and down.





33. Willis Museum, Basingstoke, Autumn 2017

Founded: 1931

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, art, archaeology

Frankly Basingstoke needs all the history it can get, but I've always found the walk through the malls from the railway station in the direction of the old town centre, interspersed with open spaces from which you plunge back under cover again, rather exciting. It's in the centre that you find the Willis Museum, located in the old Town Hall, which sits in bright whitewash on the edge of the market square like a colossal architectural cake (a comparison which has a curious echo inside, as we will see). It's named after its founder, George Willis, who is memorialised on the stairs in one of the oddest municipal portraits ever. The confusing designation 'Willis Museum and Sainsbury Gallery' arises from the private funding for the refurbishment of the temporary display space in the 2000s, the immortalisation of this glorious benefaction presumably being a condition of the donation. It's the humbler and more homely presence of Mr Willis, clockmaker and Mayor, which is more to the fore.

Jane Austen is a local celebrity (well, nearly local) and when I visited there was a show on downstairs about Georgian habits and fashions, very little preparation for the excessive eclecticism of the rest of the museum. The cool detachment of the art gallery space contrasted with the touches of opulence around the municipal staircase and the *very* strange atmosphere of the carpeted topmost room with its great polished table for council committee meetings, forming a bizarre juxtaposition with Mr Willis's archaeological collection arranged in dark cases around the walls. The local history gallery romps through the story of Basingstoke, taking in a Victorian wedding cake under a glass dome, which really does look like something out of the imagination of HP Lovecraft, and culminates in the redevelopments of the twentieth century. This last is particularly admirable as museums all too often skate over recent and potentially controversial history; there's no evading it here, and you get a mocked-up JCB digger smashing into a house wall. Wreckage and destruction. Finding all this behind the unassuming frontage of the Town Hall (and in Basingstoke!) was so thoroughly unexpected I couldn't help being nearly overcome with delight.





34. Bridport Museum, Autumn 2017

Founded: 1932

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

Bridport Museum allowed me an uncommon chance to see before-and-after views of the same place, having been completely refurbished between my two visits in 2011 and 2017. Formerly it was a standard small-town local history museum jammed with *stuff* and not always coherently; now *coherence* is its backbone and this is thoroughly refreshing. There is no doubt about what sort of place Bridport is, if you pay the remotest degree of attention to the displays: it's 'A town on the Jurassic Coast', 'An eventful town', 'A place to work', etc. The displays are no longer that object-heavy, and some of the artefacts are relegated to a completely promiscuous gathering in a side room as they were collected without information or context (the kind of thing, the display text informs you with what almost seems a sigh of resignation, that every museum finds in its collection). There are even disorientating moments when you realise that what you're looking at doesn't actually include anything authentically historical at all. But there are points of great flair and style: chief among these are the ropemaking display and the Roman *lorica*. Bridport's famous rope industry actually dominated the town less than you might imagine, but one room is devoted to it and is overpowered, rightly, by the mighty spinning machine at one end: the texts make it clear how people's very lives were controlled

by this very thing, *this* thing, *here*. Upstairs in the archaeology display, a pitiful handful of bronze fitments are brought alive by being mounted on a translucent plastic *lorica* which glows an unearthly blue, brilliantly drawing you into the room as you ascend the stairs.

Here you can look out on the street through three arched windows in an alcove. I often complain that museums make too little of their buildings, but charismatic though Bridport's setting is - a Tudor-Gothic glory in dark honey-coloured stone - nobody knows its history, and after a catastrophic fire in 1876, the wonderful frontage is just that, a facade only. Enjoy it, then, as a somewhat reticent artefact in its own right. The Museum is free to go in and a model of clarity and intent.





35. Sherborne Museum, Autumn 2017

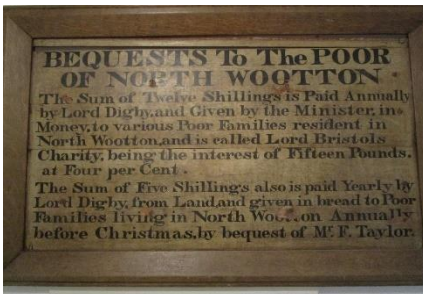
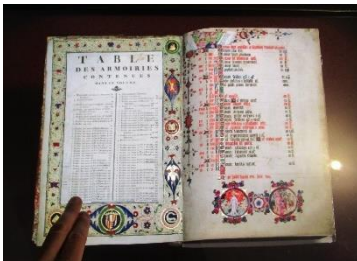
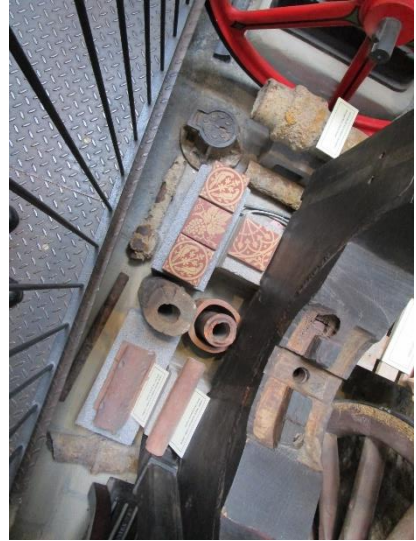
Founded: 1968

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

The Abbey Gatehouse in Sherborne, all Tudor Gothic windows and warm golden stone, is a fine structure but promises a very *bijou* town museum inside. In fact, the displays range over two floors and into the next building too. They've grown up somewhat higgledy-piggledy since the Sherborne Local Historical Association was given the Gatehouse and set the Museum up in 1968, and are perhaps at the point where they could do with somebody sitting down with a pot of tea and a pen and paper and having a good think about reorganising them. They are no less fun, nevertheless, than any other set of displays in a museum of Sherborne's size and type. And in a hallway linking two galleries on the ground floor is a striking evocation of the town's streetscape, achieved not by making mocked-up shopfronts such as you find in many such displays, but by gathering together signs and street furniture, medieval floor tiles as a sort of signification of the ground level, and, beneath them, the pipes and conduits that make their way under the streets. It succeeds brilliantly. A flash of modernity comes with the digital version

of that luscious and numinous manuscript, the Sherborne Missal. You don't get *all* the pages to flick through virtually - that would be too much to ask - but the selection includes the famous vignette of St Juthware having her head cut off and carrying it to the altar of Halstock church. The Missal glows in the corner of one darkish room, a magical portal to another world of thought and experience. The British Library keeps firm hold on the real thing, of course.



36. The Old Operating Theatre Museum, Southwark, Summer 2018

Founded: 1962

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Medical history

I pondered for a long while whether to include the Old Operating Theatre among my featured museums. It isn't a local museum really (though everywhere is local to somewhere!), but for sheer bizarre personality it is hard to match and so – rules are there to be broken.

It was July 2018, the hottest day of the year. My day trip to London had taken me on a long and picturesque walk from St James's through Piccadilly and Covent Garden, to Lincoln's Inn and the Temple and finally across the river to Southwark. I reached the Old Operating Theatre in early afternoon and once through the door ascended the winding wooden staircase next to the swanky bar that now outrageously occupies the body of what was once the Church of St Thomas; for the Museum, you see, is crammed into the attic of that once-sacred edifice. It is an experience like no other. Would the stairs never end?

Arriving at the reception desk, I did my best not to pant visibly and took a glug from my water bottle before plunging into the corridor that led into the displays. Chaos, apparently, awaited. Bottles, uneasy antique medical equipment, fading yet still lurid manuals of surgery, herbs and powders in tubs and pots, lined every available surface in a sweltering wooden room – the Herb Garret. But the ordeal was not yet over. Up, up, and I emerged into the final sanctum, the Operating Theatre itself. Its great skylight, designed to direct light down onto the table, lensed the blazing power of the sun this July day. The hottest room in London. A lecture was in progress: I sat among the mainly young people and managed about five minutes before the furnace temperatures drove me out, and back to the Garret where the heat was merely appalling rather than impossible. How the lecturer managed I can't imagine.

The Garret was used by the apothecaries of St Thomas's Hospital, adjoining, to store medicines and herbs, and then in 1822 the Theatre was built in it to avoid female inmates having to watch fellow patients being operated on in the ward. Shut up in 1862 when the hospital left the building, it was not exactly forgotten, but not visited with any purpose again until 1956. Enough



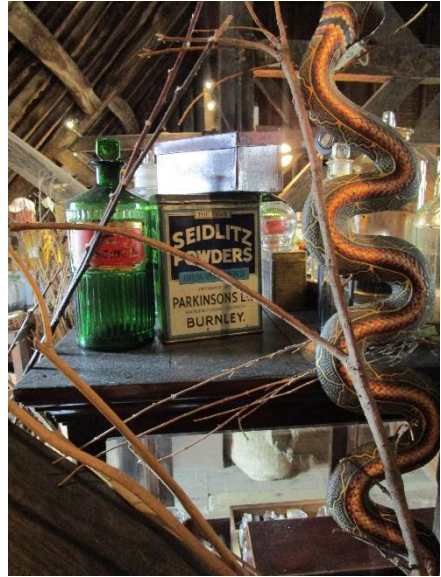
remained for the space to be restored, the only surviving 19th-century operating room in Europe.

We casually call them ‘theatres’, but this one really is. Tiered seating for students surrounds the operating table, the seat of the drama of life and death. You are surprised that blood is not evident on the floor, so much must have hit it over those forty years, and this dreadful space does not lose its power, its witness, because of the students in their modern clothes around its benches.

After that, the alembics and the bottles and the twigs and the dried snakes back in the Garret come as a

relief. There is even whimsy to be had here and there. Back down the wooden stairs, and onto the street, and it’s not right to say you’ve recovered: this is a museum visit you will take with you a long way.





37. St Albans Museum & Art Gallery, Summer 2018

Founded: 2018

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, art

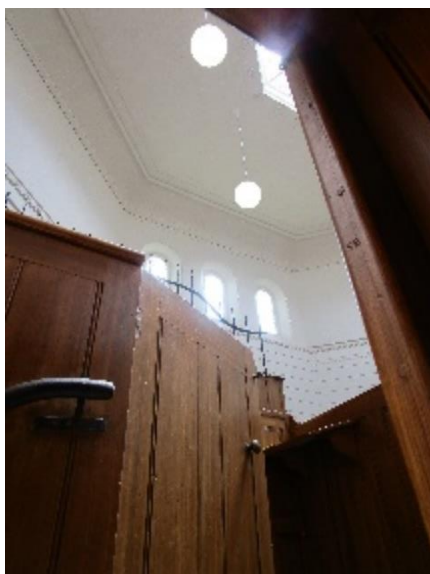
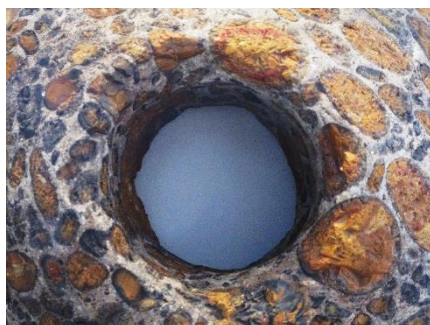
When I arrived in St Albans, a place I'd briefly visited in the past but never spent any time in, I had no idea the city Museum was not only new, but absolutely brand new - it had been open barely a month. No wonder it

hadn't appeared on tourist maps of the city yet. It did have the feel of an institution which was not quite finished, and where the easy bit - thought, presumably, to be the museum displays themselves - had been left till last. There is really very little stuff in it, in contrast to other museum spaces (the following day would find me sweltering my way around the Old Operating Theatre Museum in Southwark, and that, as you will have seen, is positively stuffed with stuff). The local history material can be found in a series of low-key cases on the ground floor and a miscellaneous collection of objects on the landing, and it's the art which occupies a more prominent place. A collection of red velvet flower-like objects spill from a hearth; a tasteful chair guards spidery pictures mounted against a wall. Mind you, one of the current exhibitions did mark an intersection of art and social history: it was a brilliant little show about squatting in St Albans in the 1980s which, despite the participants' insistence that it was a time of freedom and fulfilment, made me very thankful that it's an experience I have, so far, avoided.

No, the star of St Albans Museum & Gallery is the building. It is the former Town Hall, and like many Town Halls boasts (that is the word) the usual Classical portico entrance. The rooms are spacious, white, and exhilarating, and long may they remain so as school groups scuff around the skirting boards and overworked curators forget blobs of blu-tac on the walls and the



oily marks they leave behind. What this Town Hall also has that others don't is a wood-panelled court room and a series of brick-walled underground cells. The court room is now the museum café: you purchase your drinks or food in the foyer and then go and consume it among the benches where judges once frowned, lawyers orated, jurors yawned and prisoners sweated. If you need the loo, you go down to the cells which is where the toilets are. From there you can climb a little stairwell into the dock, and that's the weirdest experience of all.



38. Coldstream Museum, Autumn 2018

Founded: 1994

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, military history

You would expect a museum in Coldstream to major (no pun intended) on the local regiment, the Coldstream Guards, and this is indeed the case, though the museum also finds space for the general history of the town within its *bijou* premises. However, the collection isn't extensive, and so the version of Coldstream's past it presents is an impressionistic rather than a



systematic one, depending on what it has available to show: still, as we always say, you can't go wrong with old medical bottles, and the museum does well integrating its toys with activities for children, or rather, appealing specially to them. And that's about all I can say. I visited Coldstream Museum suffering badly from a strained knee and sore feet as a result of walking far too far in inappropriate footwear, and though it provided a refuge, I was somewhat distracted!



39. Belford Museum, Autumn 2018

Founded: 2012

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

There's not much to Belford, to be honest, especially on a wet and windy weekday afternoon in October. It used to be a big deal in mid-Northumberland, the area's farmers convening for its markets, travellers using its inns and hosting all the businesses which helped a rural economy function. But I felt blown along the pavement from one early-closed shop front to another. How many places still have early closing?

Which makes Belford Museum all the more remarkable. It's tiny, but a completely volunteer effort funded originally by a Lottery grant in 2012 and opened that year in the old Reading Room, itself a relic of aristocratic philanthropy from the long past. I'd only ended up there at all after discovering that a museum I wanted to visit somewhere else no longer existed (if it ever had) and picking up a leaflet about Belford's in a tourism information centre. I discovered within the unassuming grey stone exterior a proud symbol of community identity, packed with detail (there's a lot on those information panels) and an exhibition about World War One coinciding with the centenary of the 1918 Armistice. Apparently the displays change frequently.



I was hugely impressed that a small community can produce something of this kind, but it was a slightly unnerving visit. I didn't encounter a single other human being, visitor or volunteer. It seems as though they open up, check the loo and then leave, perhaps trusting that anyone interested enough to hunt the museum out won't be up to no good. Maybe one ought not to advertise that, come to think of it. Oh well.



40. The Museum of Farnham, Winter 2018/19

Founded: 1961

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

Willmer House on West Street is one of Farnham's many handsome Georgian buildings. Its complex history – merchant's dwelling, private school, dentist's surgery, and billet for Canadian troops – can barely be glimpsed in its incarnation as a museum, despite its wood-panelled rooms and grand main staircase. It's best to find out about it before you begin making your way around, and then allow the creaking floorboards and aroma of old oak and polish to prompt your imagination. In a long, narrow burgage-plot garden you'll find artwork and architectural fragments. The displays are carefully put together. I will remember with something of a shudder the taxidermied squirrels playing cards, and with bemused affection *The Three Graces Playing Croquet at Farnham Castle* by Sir John Verney. The painter apparently once declared 'any picture can be improved by including one or two ecclesiastics'; and who, on viewing the result here, could say him nay, unless we suspect 'improved' really means 'made to look even more dodgy'.





41. Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, Spring 2019

Founded: 1856

Governance: Local Authority

*Scope: Art, applied art, ethnography, archaeology,
local history*

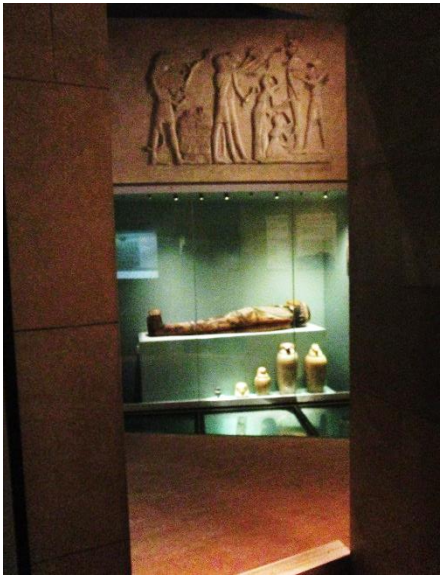
Brighton is an exceptional locale in various ways, and the Museum sets out to take its place within that exceptionality (if there is such a word). It wants to be grand, *and* to stake a claim as a radical advocate of the alternative. It's part of the Pavilion complex and from the outside could almost be a mosque of old Al-Andalus; inside it's just as striking. Gorgeous encaustic tiles accompany you up a staircase at the rear of the grand central atrium, and on the upper floor Moorish arches open into vistas of distant galleries.

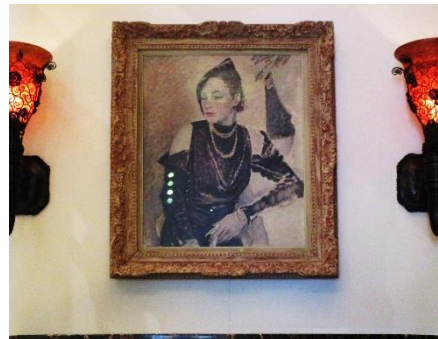
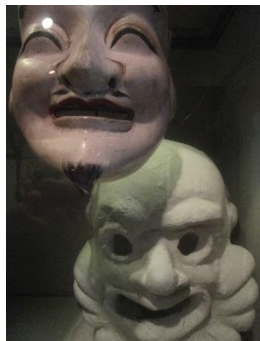
The displays are very eclectic and there is no coherent story, rather a collection of glittering fragments, but everything is sort-of there, from fishing boats to Prinny and his Regency pretensions, Mods and Rockers on 1960s beaches to a moving examination of contemporary trans identity. There are strong archaeology galleries, and rooms of global cultural artefacts put into human context rather well with lots of opinion from the people they belong to culturally. Like almost every museum which has a significant Ancient Egyptian collection, it seems, Brighton displays its in a sepulchral looping walkway of subdued light and eerie backlit cases.

However I thought the crowning glory of the museum is that great central atrium, devoted to a ravishing collection of



twentieth-century decorative art. It's a charismatic space, spectacularly rendered with some of the most sumptuous kit I've ever seen in a single museum gallery.





42. Honeywood Museum, Carshalton, Spring 2019

Founded: 1990

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local & domestic history

Carshalton has leafy bits and rough-edged bits, but at its centre is a pond, overlooked on one side by the amazing All Saints' Church - as baroque an Anglo-Catholic playground as you could wish to see - and on the other by the rambling Honeywood House. This was a private home until just before World War Two when the Council bought it as part of a foresighted effort to preserve the centre of the town from suburbanisation. After decades of various uses it finally emerged as a heritage centre and museum in 1990. The whole ensemble is an island of tranquility in the outer London suburbs, not so much a village scene as a set-piece organised around that great pool.

Honeywood's history is confused by shifting names and tenancies, and that seems reflected in the way the museum is structured: the fact that the tea shop has a separate entrance next to the way into the galleries appears emblematic. Staircases lead up and down, opening into rooms that look at the inhabitants of the house and the uses to which it has been put, and it's almost by accident that something of the wider history of Carshalton, its mills and industries, emerges from the displays. You find yourself in a billiard room, or a bathroom, with the strange feeling that you've intruded on someone's living space. But it remains great fun, especially because every now and again you catch a glimpse of the pond through a window, reminding you why you're there, really.





43. Chertsey Museum, Summer 2019

Founded: 1960

Governance: Local Authority

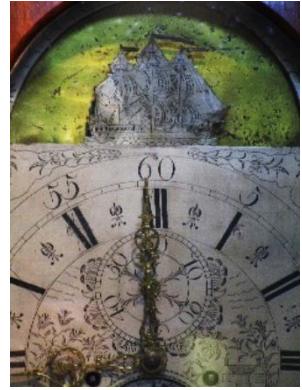
Scope: Local history, costume

In the summer of 2019 I returned to Chertsey Museum after a first visit many years ago, and had forgotten how good it is! Admission is free, the displays are well-thought out and varied, and the building is a handsome Georgian town house, albeit somewhat mucked-about with. Something even happened which has never befallen me in any other museum: I discovered the answer to a question that was on my mind when I arrived, the identity of a small mansion house I encountered in the past and which I saw mentioned in a display about the vanished life of the country house in northwest Surrey. The story of Chertsey is entwined with that of its long-vanished Abbey, and there was a temporary exhibition about that when I called by.

But the special glory of Chertsey Museum is the Olive Matthews Collection, a nationally-significant accumulation of costume and accessories mainly dating from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, with some earlier and later pieces. Miss Matthews began gathering her collection as a child and kept going until it amounted to over 4000 items. Friends eventually realised how important it was, helped set up a trust to look after it, and negotiated an arrangement with Chertsey Urban District Council (as was) to house it in the Museum. And there it still is, to the delight and edification of all.

I can't remember why there's a case of ancient Greek ceramics. The rest of the place makes sense.





44. Market Hall Museum, Warwick, Autumn 2019

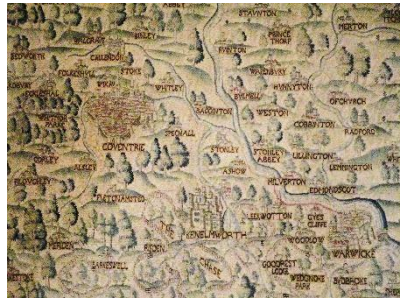
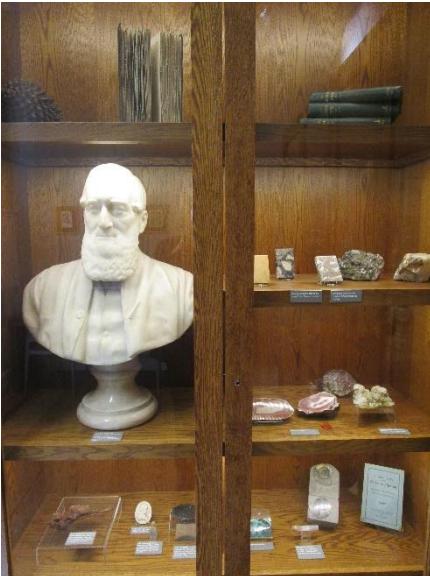
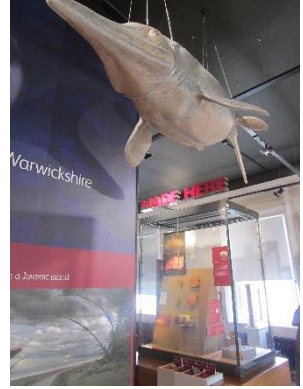
Founded: 1836

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history & archaeology

Warwick circles the top of the hill it's occupied since Saxon times, a quintessential county town: you can mostly ignore the presence of the Castle which lurks at its southern margins and which costs so much to get into that I didn't venture closer to it than was necessary to take a photograph. Warwick's Museum Service - actually the County of Warwickshire's - divides itself between two sites, St John's House on the eastern margins of the town, and the 17th-century Market Hall, splendidly sited among cafés and small shops at the top of the cobbled Market Place: it was the latter I saw. Its round-headed arches are now filled with glass, and whereas they once sheltered stalls and traders, they now almost inevitably house a café of the Museum's own.

St John's House deals with the service's collection of social history material, leaving the Market Hall with everything else - art, industry, archaeology, palaeontology and stuffed stuff. Some of this is quite random; hence as you enter the galleries you are greeted by the Museum's mascots, a stuffed bear and an elk skeleton. This is another thematic rather than a chronological museum, and the downstairs room introduces the three main themes - 'Getting Here', 'Living Here' and 'Made Here'. It seems ever-so-slightly desperate, its inventiveness masking the fact that the objects are mainly stuffed otters, teddy bears and a Tesco worker's shirt, until you realise there's an upstairs as well! There things open out and luxuriate a bit, and there's more to look at, including antique musical instruments, weirdly positioned in a case, and a gigantic map of the county in Tudor tapestry. One wood-panelled room of oak display cases recognises the mid-19th century origins of the Museum in the collection of the Warwickshire Natural History & Archaeological Society, a complete and refreshing contrast from the darker main gallery. It's hard to tell the story of something as nebulous and disparate as an English shire county, but the Market Hall Museum does pretty well. The sculpture expressing what Warwickshire makes, or has made at some stage, is inspired: a tyre hangs over your head in the company of a bag of cement, a video game handset, and a fez, among other things. It could get no better!



45. Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum, Autumn 2019

Founded: 2000

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history, medical history, art

Pre-Georgian Leamington was an unremarkable little place with a healing spring - a Holy Well, some say - in the corner of the churchyard. Then a pair of entrepreneurial coves, observing the money to be made from therapeutic waters elsewhere, sunk their own well not far away and the Spa was born. Grand parades of houses and shops spread up the hillside, and eventually the Royal Pump Rooms opened just south of the river. It is the Pump Rooms which house the Art Gallery & Museum, among other public facilities.

As a result, the Museum is presented with surroundings which mean it just can't lose. Most of the time the visitor can move around unaware of where they might be in relation to the former use of the building, but at its centre yet glimpsed from a variety of angles is the Turkish Bath, restored to jewel-like splendour. I had no idea that the Spa functioned as part of the National Health Service (basically for physiotherapy) until the 1980s, and the Museum presents this history notwithstanding the slightly queasy quality of some of the objects it has to display as a result! Together with insights into the wider history of the town, which was not all Regency grandeur, and the art displays, this amounts to something unique.





46. Banbury Museum, Autumn 2019

Founded: 1940s

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, canal history

The rain poured down as I made my way through Banbury, past the phantom of what was once Tooley's Boatyard and which is now a shop and a shed holding one boat next to a slight widening of the canal, into the Museum. That moved here in 2002 from a historic building into part of a

brash new shopping centre. Banbury's canals feature in its displays - you approach the reception desk via the Waterways Gallery, a long, elevated corridor with some sparse exhibits which allows the Museum staff plenty of time to see you coming ... Once you're through that experience (and if there isn't a special exhibition on which takes your fancy) you are likely then to proceed upstairs to the history gallery. This is basically one large room containing some interesting things including a remarkable set of Civil War relics (how has the saddle survived?), a cart through which you can catch glimpses of the exhibits (and other visitors), and a huge aluminium wall-map made by a local metals manufacturer. The one disconcerting element came in the form of the loudest movement sensors I have ever heard: **CLUNK CLUNK** they go, *wherever* you are, *however* you try to avoid them, and *whenever* you so much as lift a hand to scratch your nose.



47. Bourne Hall Museum, Ewell,

Autumn 2019

Founded: 1970

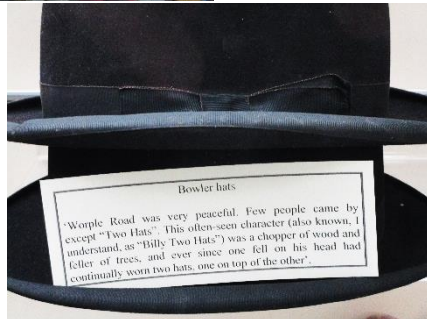
Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history

When I was just starting out in the wondrous museum world, I had very definite ideas as to what museum displays should be like: they ought to have a clearly-expressed point of view, and examine local identity and maybe even conflict in a way that might be challenging, outlining the jagged edges of a community's history. In my first job I had to put together a little display case of 'law and order' related items at the Priest's House in Wimborne: I included a little diagram listing who the magistrates were at the time, an intimidating list of local clergy and gentry. 'They had it all sewn up, didn't they?' commented Stephen, the curator. I was awfully pleased he'd noticed.

I still don't completely disavow that approach, and I thrill a bit when I can 'read' what a museum is trying to tell me. But I am more tolerant now. Bourne Hall exemplifies a much more elliptic strategy: the displays here come alongside you and tell you apparently random stories, yet by the time you leave, you find you have indeed discovered the personality of Ewell town almost despite yourself.

Modern Bourne Hall replaced an old house in 1962, supposedly demolished because it was too run-down to repair although one wonders if that would happen nowadays. All around is the parkland that once belonged to the mansion, complete with a swan-haunted lake; the building houses not only the Museum, but the borough library and a variety of meeting rooms. Once through the swishing doors you ascend a staircase to the mezzanine where the displays are, and there you wander. Undirected, your eye is drawn by this or that object (scout banners, uniform jackets, a carving of a white hart atop a case, a pair of strangely stacked bowler hats) and slowly, sidelong, the story of a community emerges through the episodes from its past it has remembered. Beneath the seemingly-promiscuous assemblage, a penetrating sense of what matters has been at work to select what you're seeing, or at least the background details and narratives that reveal what the objects have witnessed. Reaching the mocked-up Roman villa on the far side, you look back and realise you've come on quite a journey and perhaps weren't really aware of it. You go downstairs for a coffee, and smile to yourself as you remember the stories you'll take away.



48. Tenby Museum & Art Gallery, Autumn 2021

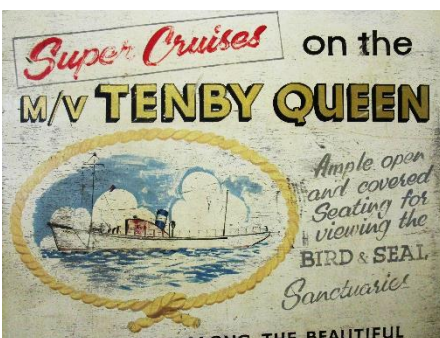
Founded: 1878

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history, art

The setting of Tenby Museum could hardly be more impressive: perched on the south side of the Castle headland, and gazing across the beach towards St Catherine's Rock and Caldey Island a mile away, sometimes sun-baked and sometimes storm-lashed, in an old house which was once part of the Castle living quarters, and reached by a snaking and ever-so-slightly scary path. I think, though, it was a little unfair to visit less than a month after it reopened subsequent to the pandemic restrictions: like a number of heritage attractions, Tenby Museum seemed to have taken the decision to get some longstanding work done, and it wasn't quite finished. Thus the staircase, stripped of its customary display about the fishing history of the town (and pirates), had a high, long display case of 'relics of the French attack on Fishguard in 1797', entirely without context, and I missed the significance of the Peruvian pottery figures too. The story of Tenby emerges reticently from the displays, but you get Augustus John's paint palette, skulls and axes, and a sedan chair looming over the stairs.





49. Cynon Valley Museum, Aberdare, Autumn 2021

Founded: 2001/2016

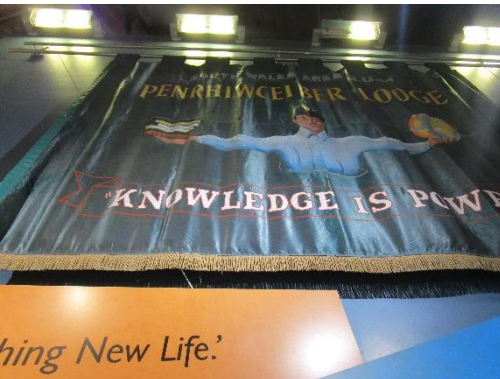
Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

My sister-in-the-Spirit Cylene the Goth recently moved to Aberdare and having tried to visit the Museum found it shut due to covid, but by the time I turned up in October it was triumphantly open again - although much to my disappointment the café was still waiting for the go-ahead. It may be back by the time you go! I use the word *triumphant* because there is a great deal of pride about this place, and justifiably. You will notice in the heading the dual foundation date: the Museum closed in 2014 due to funding cuts and a dogged group of locals formed a trust to reopen it, moving to an old iron works just across the road from Tesco. Lottery funding has made possible a visually vibrant and exciting exhibition space full of colour and life. There are two small gallery spaces occupied, when I was there, by a show of work from a group of local art societies, and a main gallery organised around a mocked-up old grocery store which you enter only to find the bell ringing to alert a non-existent shopkeeper of your presence, and at the sound of the bell (I found), you become possessed by a mixture of amusement and slight embarrassment. The 'story' of the Cynon Valley and its people moves somewhat abruptly from Neolithic remains to early 19th-century ironmaking, and there were a couple of display cases where I could find no captions at all, but the objects are generally so splendid (and so splendidly

arranged) it barely matters. Aberdare, as the ‘capital’ of Cwm Cynon, features strongly, but not exclusively: and what comes across most powerfully is the sense of community generated by the shared experience of work, and sometimes worklessness, of good and bad times, extending across the last two centuries of this part of south Wales. The museum, in fact, is an expression of that as well as a means of preserving and presenting it: it has a democratic soul and a campaigning will, and reminds me why I wanted to work in museums all those years ago.





50. Museum of Bath at Work, Autumn 2021

Founded: 1976

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history, industrial history

While in Bath I steered clear of both the Roman Baths with its £20 entrance fee, and anything to do with Jane Austen, to visit instead the Museum of Bath at Work, located behind a red door at the end of a yard off an obscure street to the north of the city centre ... There wasn't a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard', but it was almost *that* overlooked.

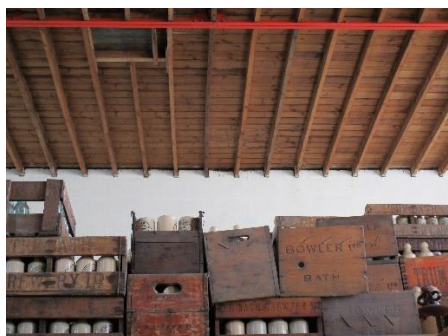
MBW is not part of the Bath Preservation Trust which looks after several of the other museums, nor linked to the Council which has responsibility for the Roman Baths: I was greeted by an elderly lady on the front desk (I think with a northeastern accent) who informed me that 'the museum was set up to tell the story of the people of Bath who weren't Romans or Georgians', with a hint, I thought, of defiance. She stood behind the original shop counter of Mr Bowler's engineering business, based not here in this 18th-century building, but down by the river: as the business - which had begun with brass-founding and progressed through general engineering, soft drinks bottling, and even shoe-selling at one stage - began to run down in the late 1960s, the Bowler family were courted by Mr Russell Frears. He'd trained as an industrial designer and realised that the Bowlers had never thrown away a single bottle, founding pattern, bill or bit of paper, and that what they had on their hands was an industrial museum in the making. Mr Frears spearheaded the founding of the Bath Industrial Heritage Trust specifically to make that a reality, and six years after the Bowler factory was demolished the Museum opened on its current site.

Even though what you're looking at is all a mock-up, it's mocked-up so fully that you do feel at points that you *are* walking through a small factory - or you would do if it wasn't for various bits of art for sale around the exhibitions. Straight after the reception is the machine shop, where you press a green button on the wall and the whole display gradually judders into life, driven by the flying belts to a frenzy of rattling, banging, screeching and whirring, until you can bear no more and press the red button whereon it slows to a stop again. It all looks massively dangerous and you are glad to be looking down on it from a mezzanine rather than being in the midst of it. There is then a quieter gallery looking at the history of Bath as a whole with special reference to industry and work, including, on

my visit, a special display about the avant-garde havoc the Bath Arts Workshop caused around the city in the 1960s and 70s, a scourge of the City Fathers and an outrage to public decency. There's a beautiful Horstmann car from 1914, a Bath chair (of course), and a set of road-marker's chalks, something whose existence I never thought about.

MBW clearly posits itself as 'alternative Bath', and while the entrance fee is a bit steep, it deserves to be championed far and wide. Wonderful stuff, unafraid at having a different point of view, and not a toga in sight. Well, almost.





51. Museum of Richmond, Autumn 2021

Founded: 1983

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

Richmond seems like an old place, but isn't really. Until Henry VII decided to call the rebuilt royal palace of Sheen *Richmond* in allusion to his North Yorkshire earldom, and a town grew up around it, Sheen it was, and not Richmond at all; municipally speaking, it only gained its independence in 1890. You may have read my account of the museum in the *other* Richmond

earlier; the main function of the museum of Richmond, Surrey, seems to be to insist on the town's identity as a separate place within the sprawling suburbs of southwestern London. Not just a separate place, in fact, but a genteel, nay a *Royal* one.

My first visit was in 2013 and for some reason I only took two photos, so in 2021 I returned with my friend Ms Brightshades. The Museum occupies part of the old Town Hall which also houses a variety of other facilities and we had a bizarre degree of difficulty in finding our way in, taking wrong turns more than once and nearly ending up in the Library - it was no better leaving, either, just done in reverse. But the exhibition space itself is a bright, modern, carpeted environment, which is curiously calm and restful, perhaps in contrast to the trauma of getting there. While most of the staff are volunteers, the Museum now has three professional workers whereas eight years ago there was only one, and I have the impression that the whole place has been spruced up and arranged in a more aesthetically pleasing way. At the very least they've moved the old keys about as my 2013 photo of them is very different from the 2021 version. I discovered later on that I had a local history question to ask, and though I thought it was a bit obscure it was turned round within the day. So there is good work being done here!





Keys in 2013



Keys in 2021



52. Whitstable Community Museum & Art Gallery, Autumn 2021

Founded: 1985

Governance: Independent trust

Scope: Local history

No sooner were we in through the door of Whitstable Museum, off a side street in the former Foresters' Hall, than we were accosted by a man dressed as George Stephenson. I usually avoid costumed interpreters like the plague even if they are not pretending to be plague victims, but there is a convincing reason why George Stephenson has washed up in Whitstable: the centrepiece of the Museum's first room is his second-ever locomotive, *Invicta*. Proudly independent and volunteer-run, Whitstable Museum is in fact a fine example of its kind, the displays arranged with quite a bit of flair. Peter Cushing used to live nearby, so there's a case about him, not far from a range of Roman Samian Ware pans found in the sands, lots of items relating to oyster-catching and diving, and what appears to be a large green papier-maché fish (I didn't inspect it too closely). The best bit is the stories: the one that stuck with me particularly was the memory of a chap stationed in one of the Thames Estuary forts during World War Two, to the effect that pilots used to amuse themselves by attempting to fly between the forts' legs, meaning the fellows actually aboard the forts would hear a plane approaching and never be quite sure whether it was the RAF or the Luftwaffe. This is a great small museum, loved by the people who look after it, and looked after with some care and imagination.





53. Dorset Museum, Dorchester, Autumn 2021

Founded: 1845

Governance: Independent trust

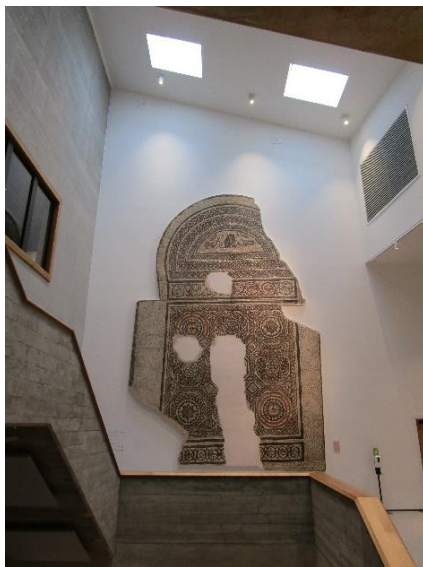
Scope: Local history, art, palaeontology

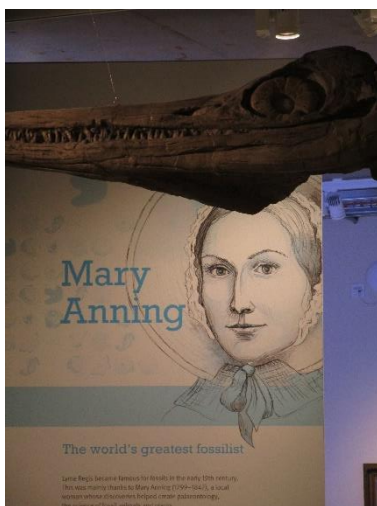
The clichéd image of the great museum is the Classical portico; the mighty British Museum, and so many others around the UK and the world, looks like that. But there is a different vision, not so focused on Culture and Art, but on history and a sense of place. The County Museum in Dorchester is on that end of the museological spectrum: its facade, facing onto the glorious High West Street, is Tudor-Gothic, and its great wooden door could grace a minster church, or the Guildhall of a medieval borough. And so this was the intention of the Dorset Natural History & Archaeological Society in the 1840s – the creation of an institution which would rescue the history of the county from the economic and social change sweeping across the rural landscape, and celebrate it. The current building dates to the 1880s, after the Museum had had a number of temporary homes.

Once upon a time, the main problem the Museum faced was the piecemeal muddlement of its galleries. They were centred on the great Victorian Hall, a sort of small-scale glass-and-iron take on the Dinosaur Hall of the Natural History Museum, with something of the feel of a 19th-century Nonconformist chapel about it, including an organ at one end. Its balconies were jam-packed with miscellaneous social-history *collectanea*, and, visiting, you realised with a jolt that you were *walking over* one of the highlights of the collections, the mosaics from the Roman villas at Fordington and other places. Fittingly, one of its last duties before the rebuilding of the museum in 2018-21 was to host Dippy the Diplodocus, on tour from South Ken. The rest of the galleries, even Thomas Hardy's study, couldn't quite match it.

Now, the Museum's Tudor façade still remains, but inside the place is nigh-unrecognisable. It's understandably keen to recoup some of the enormous cost of the rebuilding, and so not only is there now a rather steep entrance charge but the Victorian Hall has become an 'events space' - I could only peer into it and watch it being set with tables for rich people to come and eat at. The new organising space is a colossal Brutalist stairwell, a bit like the Ashmolean's in Oxford only rougher, with the Fordington Mosaic up one wall and the exhibition areas opening off it: those are imaginatively laid out, and ever so slightly slick, though it is churlish of me to complain about that

after grouching that they used to be disorganised! A few years of children kicking display cabinets will see to that. From farm carts to fossils to seaside holidays, from 18th-century men's waistcoats to relics from the wreck of the *Halsewell* and a model of the nuclear reactor at Winfrith, all Dorset's history is here. The monumental *mass* of it is almost overwhelming and you really do need a coffee in the swish café by the time you leave!







54. Priest's House Museum of East Dorset Life, Wimborne, Autumn 2021

Founded: 1962

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

Here, of course, I must declare an interest, having not only visited the PHM but also worked there for 18 months. One of the older buildings in the Trumptonesque Dorset town of Wimborne, clustered around its great minster church, the Priest's House is a glorious hodge-podge of a building on the High Street, gazing across at the Minster a few yards away; the core of the house is very late medieval or Tudor with 18th-century infilling at the front and other bits added on. It became a museum thanks to the generosity of the last owner, the redoubtable Miss Hilda Coles, who established the Museum Trust and became the first Hon. Curator, retreating to live in an upstairs flat. Even when she ceased to be Hon. Curator, she was still in the habit of coming downstairs at night and rearranging the displays according to her own satisfaction.

The PHM gathered a fairly standard sort of local history collection typical of many small semi-agricultural towns until East Dorset District Council decided to take it under its wing in 1990. Stephen Price, late of the well-regarded Local History Department of Birmingham City Museums, came as Curator and having a penchant for architectural history looked at the building he was now responsible for in an entirely different light, realising that much could be done to illuminate the story of the town through the history of the Priest's House itself. The process of refurbishing the building, which required emptying it of its displays and objects, revealed more clues and gradually a set of themed rooms emerged based around the results of research into different aspects of the house's past among the more familiar displays of farm equipment and kitchen bygones. Expensive handmade mannequins were purchased and displayed. So the entrance area became an old-fashioned ironmonger's; grumpy Victorian stationer Mr Low glowered behind the counter in his shop; in the Georgian parlour, widowed householder Mrs King consulted with her plumber whose initials had been found on the lead rainwater heads; and in a 17th-century back room an anonymous woman we all called Harriet for some reason sat sewing against a background of painted wallcloths based on those surviving in Owlpen Manor. Every day the first and last jobs (which fell to me when I was on



duty) were to take down or put back the wooden shutters along the bow-fronted windows: Stephen had had these constructed to recreate the 18th-century shop frontage. He and assistant curator Kate never quite achieved the ambition of rebranding the PHM as ‘The Museum of East Dorset Life’.

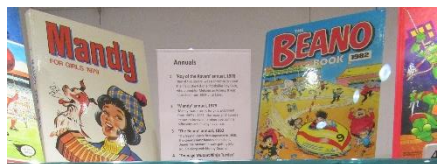
When I last went back in 2013 some things had changed: there was a Victorian schoolroom and a range of new ancillary buildings, and the somewhat spatchcock display areas upstairs which we’d never managed to do much with back in the ‘90s

had been reorganised. The Tinsmith’s Forge where I had spent several freezing days cataloguing all the exhibits, the fire dogs, hammers and tyre irons, was still there and (as I observed with a mixture of amusement, gratification and discomfiture) the little paper tags I’d attached to everything twenty years before *were still there too*.

Another ten years on, and *almost* all of that has gone. Between 2019 and 2020 the Museum underwent a wholesale reconstruction, transforming into the Museum of East Dorset. Much of the work has been driven by the need to make the space fully accessible; the jettisoning of the mannequins, no matter how well-made, is museological fashion; but, more than that, the whole display philosophy is different. Instead of a succession of period rooms, the new arrangement highlights the construction of the building. The bow-fronted windows have been replaced by a plate-glass panel. Upstairs there is a massive stone fireplace I don’t recall existing, which must have been covered up behind later plaster and woodwork. I can’t even work out where the Tinsmith’s Forge was. The only things that remain from those far-off days are the Victorian Kitchen, and the poor mummified cat, which inhabits a tiny case upstairs and, I suspect, always will, as long as the museum survives!

The Museum is now able to do so many more things with its design than we were able to 30 years ago. I especially like the interactive exploration of landscape which uses a film taking the onlooker through the great beech avenue at Badbury Rings. The redevelopment of the Priest’s House really does bring home how transient your work is, though – even within the apparently staid world of museums.





55. Reading Museum, Winter 2021/2

Founded: 1883

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history, art

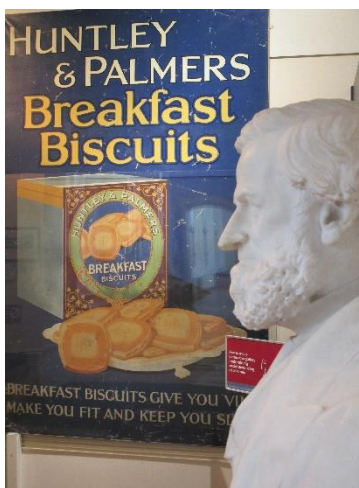
There aren't many museums like this left – council-run and -funded, housed in a grand public building (the old Town Hall, in Reading's case), and luxuriating over a great variety of subjects in its generous space. And, more than that, free to go in! A dazzling white atrium speckled with pots on shelves leads to the galleries. The first was – when I visited – a bit frustrating as the labelling of the fascinating assemblage of objects, normally on panels you pick up and read, had been removed due to covid so there was no interpretation at all. Things improved from there, though. Few museums have a gallery devoted to a single object: Reading's is the copy of the Bayeux Tapestry on the first floor; the tapestry gallery and the Silchester excavation displays are a touch old-fashioned, but very effective, *faux*-Roman tiles and brick, dark, reverent cabinets, and soaring Corinthian columns. Just along from here on the second floor is a long, awkward corridor – what to do with it, you can imagine the curators pondering. What they've done is to line it all along one side with cabinet after cabinet of biscuit tins in more variety than the human mind can comfortably conceive, as part of the story of big biscuit-makers Huntley & Palmer, deftly linked with the rest of the world through home-made African musical instruments bodged from those very

tins. A vast but potentially grim collection of rocks and stuffed animals is turned into a really good locally-relevant natural history gallery, Green Space; the art spaces are well-organised; and the Story of Reading



gallery has some beautiful assemblies of objects, packing a lot of things into a comparatively small space, organised around mocked-up Abbey cloisters and the doorway of the old workhouse. The overall feel is one of a deep commitment to history, place, and people, shaping the whole institution: dark and light spaces interact with one another and generate more variety and interest.

I was first brought here in 2019, with no time to do much more than look at the Tapestry and the shop, where they were selling postcards at 10p each. They still were in 2021. Who could resist? Not me. I stocked up with a year's worth.



56. Winchester City Museum, Winter 2021/2

Founded: 1847

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, archaeology

Like a number of other towns, Winchester divides its museum local history collections between two sites, but it does it a bit oddly. The Westgate Museum was closed when I visited: it occupies cramped and ancient premises above one of the city's medieval gates. The City Museum, on the other hand, is a purpose-built structure from the early 1900s, looking across the Close at the Cathedral. It starts with Iron Age and Roman stuff, moves on through the Middle Ages, and then jumps to the 19th century with a series of displays on the ground floor about shops and businesses: the Westgate, meanwhile, mops up Tudors, Stuarts, and the 18th century. I wonder whether the real reason why the City Museum deals with the Victorian era at all is that its gigantic model of Winchester based on the 1870s Ordnance Survey map couldn't fit in the Westgate.

The City Museum is a bit sparse in object terms, and you wonder whether there's really enough stuff to fill two whole museum sites, even modest ones. It seems designed for groups of visiting schoolchildren to charge around without doing too much damage, and the labels are *wee*, but the Roman gallery is lent a power by the reconstructed fragments, mosaics and, not least, the human remains, while on the floor below bits of medieval masonry are displayed as charismatically as they could possibly be. As well as that massive city model, my eye was caught by the apothecary's cupboard – it's a rare museum that has no chemist's jars, but an elaborate painted cupboard is a different matter – and the lavatory seat dug up from the remains of 14th-century MP John de Tyting's house. Oh, if it could speak. Or perhaps it's better it doesn't.





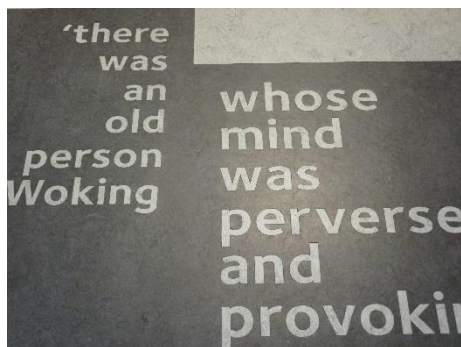
57. The Lightbox, Woking, Spring 2022

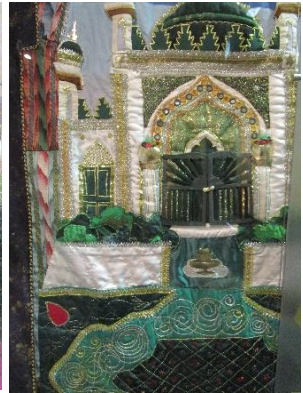
Founded: 2007

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, art

Truth be told, I've been to the Lightbox many times since it first opened, and I keep going back, not just because it is free to get in (unless you want to see the special shows), and not only for the nice café, but because it's inspirational. Designed by the same architects as the London Eye, it sits between the brutal ring-road and the concrete sluice of this bit of the Basingstoke Canal, its sloping profile dramatically different from anything else in the vicinity and its wooden façade both warmly inviting and startlingly stark. Inside, it's art that forms the backbone of the Lightbox (as its name rather implies), and a desire to use art to explore local and human identity the centre of its mission; but it also has one local history gallery. That might not sound very impressive, but the display manages to pack the whole of Woking's past into a single room with an economical skill and power you don't find everywhere. There are very few museums that tackle in such a radical and upfront way death (Brookwood Cemetery predated the development of much of the town), mental illness (Brookwood Hospital asylum was home to thousands of patients over its near-130 years), ethnic and cultural diversity, and class – especially in so small a space. And it builds into a powerful sense of place, when you might have thought Woking wouldn't have much of one. Unlike the art spaces, this permanent display doesn't change much between visits, but it just does you good to see it again.





| | Principid | Refactory | Substruct | Epiliphr |
|------------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|----------|
| Frederick Brown | | | | Yes |
| William Hynes | Yes | at times | Yes | Yes |
| Henry Ralph | No | at times | Yes | No |
| William Tunnell | Yes | occasionally | occasionally | Yes |
| Thomas Watts | No | No | No | No |
| James Woods | No | No | No | No |
| Liam White | No | No | No | No |
| Frederick Dibley | No | No | No | No |
| James Rose | No | not of late | No | No |
| Hilton | No | No | No | No |

58. Bruce Castle Museum, Tottenham, Spring 2022

Founded: 1906

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local history



The first object you see on entering Bruce Castle is a painting of the house as it was in the 17th century, which shows you quite how much the building has been mucked about. The picture was reassembled twenty years or so ago from 37 fragments discovered rolled up in the attic, and the whole museum is a little like that, a collection

of intriguing bits, not all of which can be easily explained. Why is there a '1930s office' mockup? Or a Classical statue with a broken nose in the corridor? Or another of a little girl embroidering, right by the floor? But somehow it doesn't matter because it's all so interesting – and charming. The first room is a cornucopia of distinct subjects, cases full of stuff and more local photos than you can digest, all organised around a motorbike and a swoony Edwardian portrait on the wall. The past of the building, Tottenham's ancient manor house, emerges here and there – a grand staircase, a vista of archways, its variety of fireplaces, a vast cast-iron kitchen range put in when the place was a school – but it can't all be Georgian aristocrats and Victorian reformers. Tottenham is one of London's most multicultural districts: when I visited there were displays about the Trinidadian-born textile designer Althea McNish, complete with her paints and drawing board – a real sense of presence there – and some information about businesses that catered to the black community, but this element of local history remains to be worked into the whole. Upstairs, the luminous paintings of Beatrice Offor, arranged around a long, light room with yet another amazing fireplace at the end, add a completely different experience. I missed the display of old postboxes so I may have to go back!



59. Vestry House Museum, Walthamstow, Spring 2022

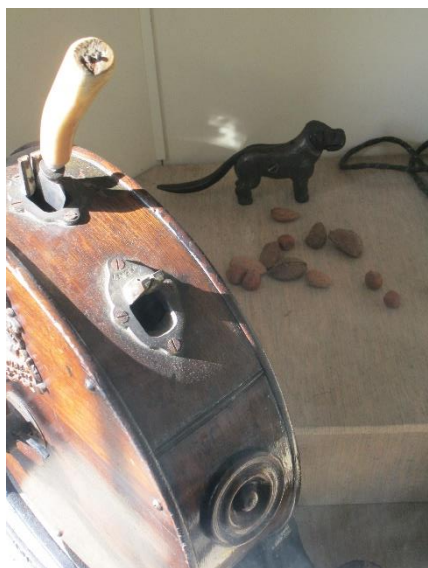
Founded: 1930

Governance: Local Authority

Scope: Local & social history

'If any would not work, neither should he eat', says the uncompromising inscription over the door of Vestry House. The building sits at the end of St Mary's Road in the most picturesque bit of Walthamstow: it was a workhouse from 1730 to 1841, when it was home to 80 paupers. Picking your way around its cramped rooms, you wonder how they all can have fitted. It then became a police station, and you can meet one unfortunate inmate in a cell, in mannequin form. There is an institutional grimness about the green hallways, even if they have nothing in them, and the lavish panelled Vestry Room forms an instructively jarring contrast to that sense of human misery even though all the woodwork came from a completely different site. I felt sympathy for a lot of the objects in the upstairs domestic life displays, being strafed with sunlight – surely in need of a refurb, those – but not many of them seem to relate to the locality. Far more locally-focused were the transport gallery organised around a Walthamstow-made motor car from 1892, and the temporary display about the late-'80s and early-'90s Waltham Forest music scene, its DJs, record shops, radio stations, raves and zines. Good, colourful, personalised stuff. Even if I don't go for the music!





60. Museum of Oxford, Spring 2022

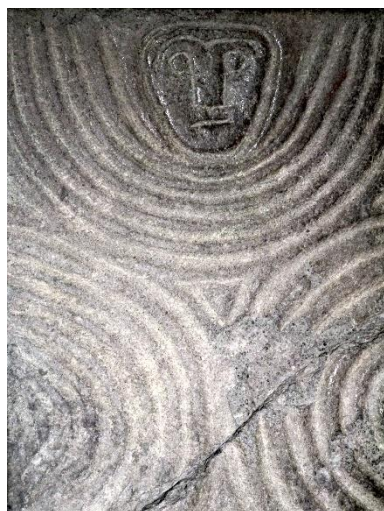
Founded: 1975

Governance: Local Authority

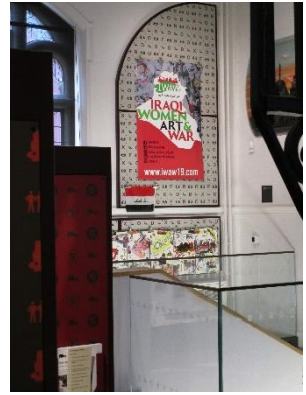
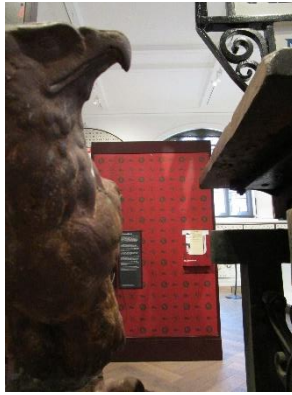
Scope: Local history

It calls itself MOX now, the City Museum of Oxford in the Town Hall, rather in the manner that Oxford's Museum of Modern Art is named MOMA – will the Ashmolean become MASHmole? I first came here as an

undergraduate when I was getting ready to apply for the Museum Studies course at Leicester, and found it trying *really hard* but not getting very far because other museums had gobbled up all the nice stuff. In 2021 it had a massive and total refurbishment, so though it was founded 47 years ago, in a way MOX is the newest museum in this selection.



You enter off St Aldates and turn right at the positively Gormenghastian Town Hall stairs. MOX has only three rooms, but they are full of interesting things and laid out with considerable flair, including some inventive interactives – I liked the light-table on which you place a variety of small objects in boxes and a film back-projected on the surface tells you the story associated with each – and very stylish graphic design. The design's bold house-style ties together disparate elements of Oxford's history and reminds you that this is a stream of stories and narratives, made up of everything from canals to Pride festivals to a house floor made from animal bones, to the age-old Oxford struggle for dominance between 'Town and Gown', City and University: it's radical, joyous, and even witty. I will go out on a limb, and say I think this is a bit of a triumph.



61. Wycombe Museum, Spring 2022

Founded: 1932

Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history, furniture

Many museums occupy historic buildings because their local council acquired them and couldn't work out what else to do with them. That was certainly true at High Wycombe: the Council bought the pretty but not at all grand Castle Hill House and its grounds in 1961 to stop the property being developed, and, after much heated discussion, moved the Museum from its previous home in the Library up to Castle Hill 'temporarily'. And sixty years later ...

When we Museum staff referred to our place of work in conversation with the town's older residents, they'd almost invariably say 'Is that the Chair Museum?', at which we would turn up our noses and point out that it was a general local history museum, didn't they know, and one with a brief over the whole District at that, not just High Wycombe itself. But in honest moments we had to admit that furniture, and especially chair-making, inevitably loomed large in its collections and displays as it did in the history and self-image of the area. After all, Wycombe Wanderers FC are colloquially referred to as 'the Chairboys', even though very few of the players today can know what to do with an adze or a taper auger. This put us into a select group of museums dominated by the history of a particular trade although our localities had really moved on: Northampton for shoes, Luton for hats, and so on.

On a sunny day you can see why the Council wanted to save Castle Hill: the house sits in its tree-lined grounds as though the outside world is a long way away, and charms all comers. The most recent refurbishment of the Museum a few years ago has removed anything that I recognise from two decades past including most of the layout, and it's definitely going for the minimalist approach. The galleries are mainly white with bare wood details, and not packed with stuff, though the most charismatic objects are there: the Red Lion from the High Street, the battered Churchwardens' Clock, lots of the nicest chairs, Jack Goodchild's tools, and the eccentric but rather fun art collection set not against white, but sumptuous dark green. There's no mistaking the commitment to tell the story of how individual people interact with objects and the place they live, including the residents of Castle Hill House itself (at least one of whom is, so legend says, still around

in spectral form), and the district's significant minority ethnic population. This current incarnation of the Museum is still in progress, the labelling gradually being upgraded and made what the staff intend it to be: a curator's work is never done, I fear.



62. Peterborough Museum & Art Gallery, Summer 2022

Founded: 1931

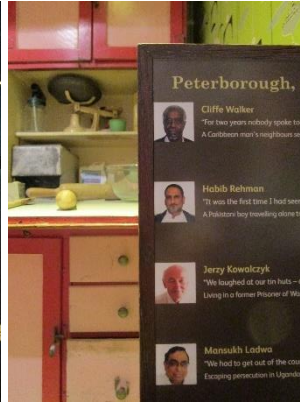
Governance: LA-supported trust

Scope: Local history

It is a rare local museum that has no Neolithic handaxes, Roman coins, agricultural tools, and Anglo-Saxon potsherds; but if that was all everyone stuck to, the museum world would be dull indeed. A museum will, instead, take the best of what it has – even if it’s a bit eccentric, even if the story it tells is not necessarily *representative* of our national story – and work with that. At best, that way, it will open its visitors’ minds to other lives and experiences.

At Peterborough Museum, these unique artefacts include the bones of the largest fish ever to have swum, *Leedsichthys* (discovered by and named after a local palaeontologist), and the amazing ‘trench art’ made at a prisoner-of-war camp for Napoleonic French soldiers (they might also have included the Water Newton Hoard, had that not been nabbed by the British Museum). The curators have run with both of these. Over a doorway, too, is a gigantic turtle shell, marked with a coat-of-arms: a label informs you that not only was the poor beast’s flesh used for turtle soup at a municipal feast in 1688, but the dish was served in *this very shell*. The building is also a notable object: constructed as a private house in 1816, it served as the city Infirmary until 1928, then opened as the Museum in 1931: even then, bits of it were let out to make money (the top floor was used to store potatoes). The Museum makes the most of original features such as the non-slip wooden blocks on the staircase, and you repeatedly meet closed doors that lead tantalisingly to bits you can’t visit, such as the nurses’ rooms. There are light spaces and dark spaces, rooms with lots of objects and rooms with few, and a huge elephant’s skull in the stairwell. Somehow around these artefacts and features the museum weaves the tale of Peterborough’s history, natural and human, culminating in modern industry and domestic life and, when we visited, the local football team.

The most affecting and yet uneasy space of all, the Operating Theatre from the building’s infirmary phase, opens unobtrusively off the stairs. Unlike Southwark’s (see pp.79-82), this is a gleaming, clinical, white-tiled room, light, rational, and *untheatrical*: but you still emerge from it blinking with the awareness of what happened there, of lives lost and saved.

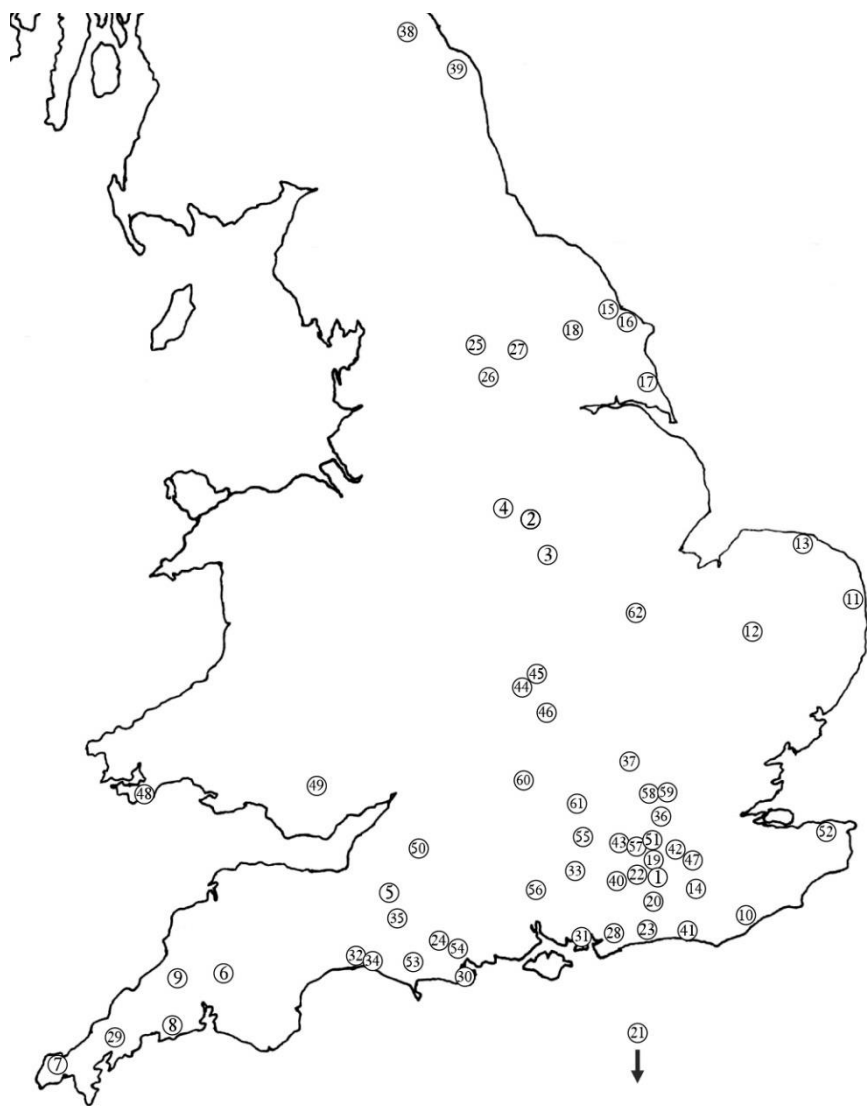


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Where the museums are





Museums are everywhere in Britain – not the great national treasure-houses in London and other cities, nor the specialist collections related to a person or subject, but general local museums with the responsibility to collect, in theory, everything from their vicinity. Some are owned and run by their local council, and some by enthusiastic bands of volunteers: some are big, some small, some proudly tiny. This book is the fruit of ten years of museum visiting by an ex-museum professional, and the conviction that every museum, no matter its size, nature or professional status, has something to tell us, and delights to offer.

