



SHG NEWS

SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

Issue 78 March 2017

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Welcome to 2017 and the new issue of SHCG News

As a new year starts (or by the time you read this, is well under way!) it is clear that museums across the country are as keen as ever to put social history at the forefront of their approaches, not just to collecting and displaying objects but also in terms of reflecting and responding to current events. SHCG's conference this year

will examine this further with the theme 'Museums and Cultural Identity in a post-2016 landscape'.

Hull as city of culture in 2017 has a particular challenge and opportunity to shape the response to that post 2016 landscape and we hear how it has begun doing that in our very first article from Sam North, a PhD student at the University of Hull. It is the first in a series of articles which have taken over what was previously known as the Bulletin Board, all of which relate to projects displaying existing collections for the first time or in a new way. Increasing access and taking a different approach to existing interpretations of collections continues to be a theme in our Theory and Practise section. As Roz Currie considers, how can we preserve the unique nature of collections while expanding our audience base and becoming more accessible? What should the focus of our museum/exhibition be? What stories should we tell? Who are we displaying this for?

These continue to be important questions in the world of social history and ones that we should keep asking ourselves to ensure the best possible care, interpretation and accessibility of these collections.

Both the Theory and Practise and Object Focus sections also investigate further the issues surrounding the care and interpretation of working, mechanical objects in the form of the Kirkaldy Testing Museum and the Big Camera at Gallery Oldham. Both of these projects demonstrate how objects can be far more powerful if still used rather than venerated in a display case and maybe this is the key to some of those questions above. After all, surely what we all hope to do through our work is to bring our collections back to life? Hopefully this issue shows a few ways in which we are doing that.

Finally, as this is my final issue as Editor of the News, I wanted to say many thanks to all of you who have provided such interesting and thought-provoking articles over the past couple of years. The next issue will be in the autumn so if any of you want to share your projects with the SHCG community please do get in touch.



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Front cover image

Hull City of Culture 2017.

Photograph by Sam North.

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Join SHCG?

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Write an article for SHCG News?

You can write an article for the News on any subject that you feel would be interesting to the museum community. Project write ups, book reviews, object studies, papers given and so on. We welcome a wide variety of articles relating to social history and museums.

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE: 24th January 2017

SHCG NEWS will encourage and publish a wide range of views from those connected with history and museums.

The News aims to act as a channel for the exchange of information and opinions about current practice and theory in museums.

The views expressed in the News are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

The suggested word count for submissions is:

Bulletin Board 100-300 words,

Theory & Practice 900-1,000 words,
Reviews and Object Focus 400- 500 words (one page) or 900-1,000 words (two pages).

Please submit your article by e-mail saved as a Word file (Arial 12 point). Images must be high resolution and can be submitted via an online transfer site, email or, if necessary, USB.

Send all contributions to:

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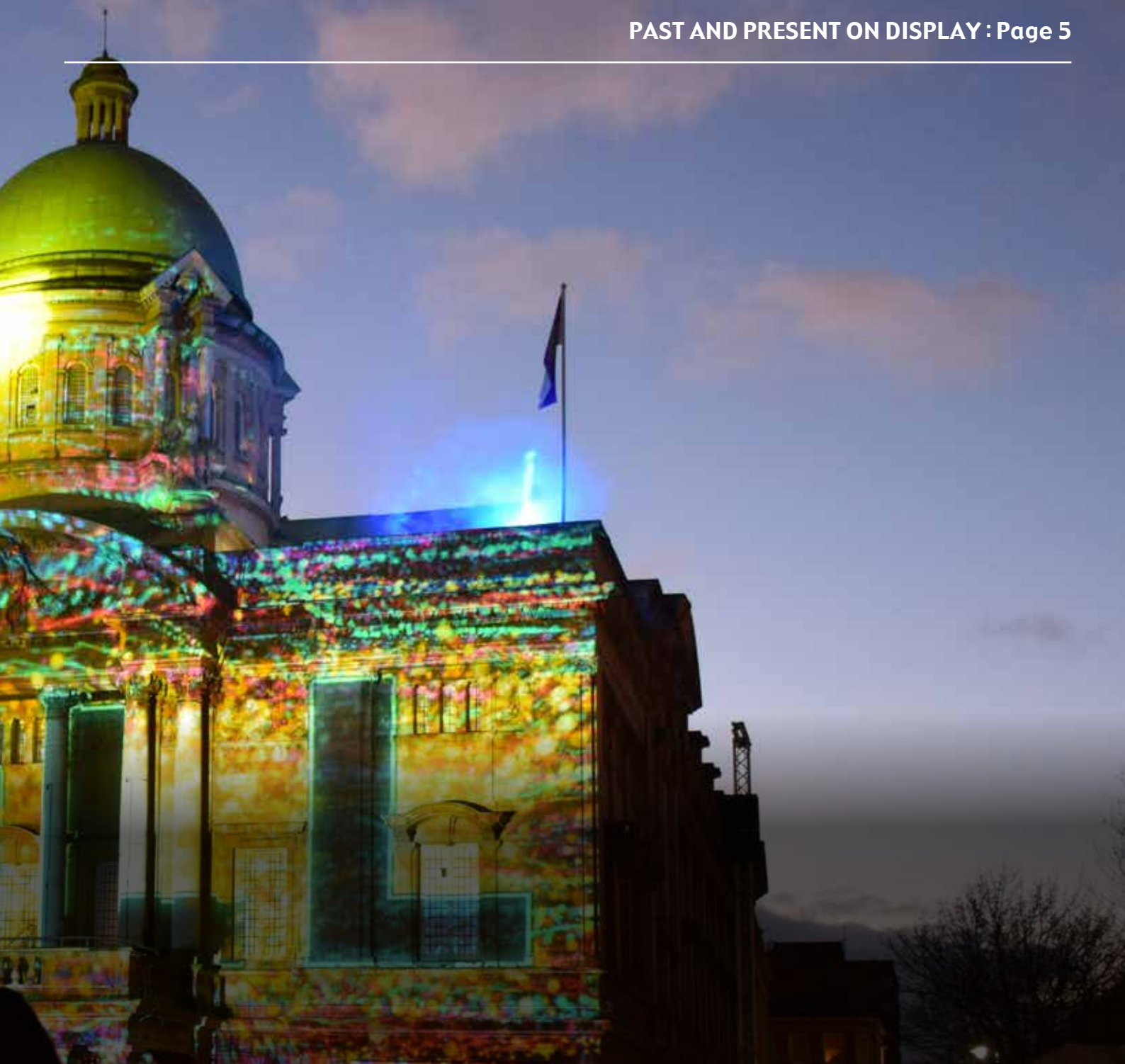
Hull's social history on display as City of Culture

Hull's status as 2017 UK City of Culture will see it host travelling exhibitions such as the British Museum's 'Lines of Thought', finance major regeneration for cultural venues, host one-off performances by renowned artists, and many yet-to-be-announced events.

Grouped into four seasons, 'Made in Hull' is the umbrella for the first three months of City of Culture, with the launch week between 1 and 7 January offering a taste of what is to come. It heralded celebrations which were almost festive in nature and appear to have encouraged positivity amongst a naturally-sceptical population. The most eye-catching elements of this week were two light shows, 'We Are Hull' and 'Arrivals and Departures', projected respectively onto the City Hall, Ferens Art Gallery, and Maritime Museum, and onto The Deep aquarium. In creating 'We Are Hull', artist Zsolt Balogh used audio-visual methods including still photographs, text, animation, and orientating sound effects to depict the genesis of modern Hull within the past seventy-five years,

with particular attention given to the Nazi bombing of the city and the decline of the fishing industry. 'Arrivals and Departures' meanwhile was the work of Simon Wainwright at Imitating the Dog, and transformed Hull's riverfront utilising research conducted primarily by Dr Nicholas J Evans of the University of Hull. The university adopted a similar approach to 'We Are Hull', though its focus on the often forgotten history of migration to and from Hull over the past two hundred years set it apart.


Whilst the artistic directors rightly gained local and national acclaim for their work the events were supported by established and emerging heritage professionals – sourcing stories that engaged hard to reach communities. My own involvement entailed scanning images which formed part of 'Arrivals and Departures'. Collections included studio portraits of individuals who had arrived in Hull, photographs of ships and locomotives which transported people, railway tickets, notable buildings, and numerous items of miscellanea. Pieced together in kaleidoscopic manner, these images were displayed as tangible links with a migrant past spanning from European



merchants and sailors, Jewish people fleeing persecution, Chinese people in the middle of the twentieth century, Kurdish refugees, and arrivals from Eastern Europe over the past decade.

The response both to 'Arrivals and Departures' and the first week's events in general has been largely positive, garnering coverage in local and national media as well as purportedly attracting 345,000 visitors in a city of 260,000 residents. One descendent of Hong Kong Chinese migrants commented of the pride she felt seeing her ancestors and their contribution to Hull recognised in 'Arrivals and Departures'. Such responses are encouraging given that Hull's migrant past is not widely acknowledged, despite the handful of commemorative markers installed in the city over the past decade. Knowledge of this past holds additional resonance given that recent migrants have sometimes attracted ill-will, as

was perhaps reflected by sixty-eight per cent of voters in Hull supporting Brexit. Quite how the display was received amongst this latter group is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge. I have, however, spoken with people who were initially scornful of a perceived wasting of public funds on what they saw as aloof and elitist arts projects yet were warmed by and readily indulged in the civic goodwill which the opening spectacular created. Here's hoping that the first week was the first step towards a lively and engaging year which will help transform national and international perceptions of Hull and enable the city's social history to reach new audiences.

 **Sam North**

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The City of London Police Museum

Over the last few months staff from Guildhall Library and the City of London Police have been working together to reinterpret the City of London Police Museum, and move it from its previous home at Wood Street Police Station to Guildhall.

This project was made possible with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund of just over £90,000 towards the development of the new museum and a community engagement programme.

Our first task was to decide what we wanted people to get out of their visit. The most important thing for us was to show that the City of London Police Force is unique, adapts constantly to a changing City, and is entirely separate from the Metropolitan Police Service. Our focus was to be on policing, rather than crime or justice, which provided us with an initial framework to tell the stories.

We were then faced with the task of fitting nearly 200 years of the Force's history into one museum, and decided a chronological approach would be best. The museum is divided into five time 'zones' with each one covering key events and topics, and an additional section at the end which showcases how police uniforms have changed over time. We start by considering how order was kept in the City before the Force was set up in 1839, before looking at themes such as wartime policing; the impact of communications technology; and present-day concerns like terrorism and economic crime.

To help us choose what to include in the museum, we had to understand what objects the City of London Police had in their collections. It was a really exciting experience looking through the original museum at Wood Street, which had cases packed full of unusual and fascinating items. It was important to make the new museum accessible and allow visitors to learn at their own pace, and so we decided to display fewer objects to have more space to tell the story of each one. Objects on show include a truncheon from 1737, the oldest item in the collection, which was made by the Worshipful Company of Bakers and beautifully decorated; a 1920 gold Olympic medal for Tug of War (the City of London Police remain reigning champions!); and a call box and switch board used by the control room until the 1980s to communicate with officers on the beat.

At the start of the project the team at Guildhall Library had limited knowledge of the police's history, and only had a few months to get to grips with the subject.

1920 gold Olympic medal for Tug of War



Inside the exhibition





Police telephone box for use by the public to call the police in an emergency

We worked closely with police officers and volunteers from the existing museum to learn more about the Force and what makes them unique. Being part of the City of London Corporation meant we also had information about London's criminal history at our fingertips, and I made use of the resources at Guildhall Library and the London Metropolitan Archives to piece together the stories in the museum.

I think one of the most interesting parts of the museum is the story of Catherine Eddowes, the only victim of Jack the Ripper murdered within the City of London. The focus of these crimes is so often on 'Jack', so we wanted to explore the story of Catherine and the police officers involved with the case. On the night she was killed she was briefly held at Bishopsgate Police Station for drunkenness and, thanks to a virtual hologram created by the Guildhall School of Museum and Drama, you have the opportunity to look into a police cell and see how Catherine may have looked during her last few hours alive.

We wanted to use different forms of interpretation to bring these stories to life and, on the journey through the museum, visitors are able to take part in various interactive activities, including completing a quiz to find out if they are 'super-recognisers', and trying on police hats.

Now that the museum is open the team is working on community engagement, putting together a programme for schools and looking at ways to incorporate oral histories in the museum. We hope to develop and grow our offering over the next few years, allowing us to help as many people as possible engage with the history of the City of London Police.



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Three Centuries of English Freemasonry

The Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London's Covent Garden has opened a new long term exhibition as a contribution to the tercentenary celebrations of the first Masonic Grand Lodge.

Modern design, lighting and cases have allowed items normally in store to be shown and it aims to explain the principles and practice of English freemasonry in a succinct and modern way for the first time.

The vast gilt wood Grand Master's throne, created for the future King George IV, is the centrepiece of the display and the regalia of famous masons such as King Edward VIII and Winston Churchill are on display – but so is the masonic certificate of the King's driver. A key element of the display refers to the diverse membership of the organisation cutting across religion, class and geography. Mentions of Empire, gender, and religion are alongside the structure of masonic lodges, some of the earliest images of freemasons anywhere and even an example of the 'Old Charges', the stonemason

guild rule books that were adopted by freemasons around the time of the first Grand Lodge meeting in 1717 .

The exhibition is in a new space created in partnership with the design firm Metaphor so the traditional 1930s library and museum space remains and is being re-dressed to show some of the more beautiful and quirky items and also celebrate the international aspects of the collections. For visitors still eager to explore after touring the museum and the Grade II* listed building, the library, archive and professional staff are on hand. A new temporary exhibition 'Brethren beyond the Seas' opens in the library in Spring 2017 and will tell the story of the many "daughter Grand Lodges" of the organisation and the international flavour of the bicentenary celebrations in 1717 as many overseas freemasons were in Britain to fight in the First World War.

All the pupils came to the launch and were asked to write invitations for their friends and families to come and see all their hard work. As Kevin McDonnell, the head of Stormont House School put it, 'The immersion in the experience is what has made it real for us; actually trying to feel what it was like to be in the trenches, to be lonely, to be frightened. Their work is on the wall, their names are on the wall, their voices are on the phone. It is fantastic to see what they have made of it.' The project reached an audience within the local community that would perhaps otherwise not have heard of, or thought to visit, a museum. It also showed a bit of local history previously unknown to many



that made the experience of the First World War more tangible and real.

There were certain difficulties which we had to overcome during the project, especially with so many different partners involved. Communication was key, particularly when dealing with the variety of professional backgrounds of those working with us. Trying to make a historically accurate and multifaceted exhibition, which was at the same time accessible to children with special educational needs, required some compromises. The same applied to dealing with the expectations of the designers within the limitations of the spaces at the museum and at the Pavilion, when the exhibition moved to Hackney Downs Park for ten days. In many ways it took a lot of work to make it all happen, but the enthusiasm of the children ensured that everyone was keen for us to succeed.

 Mark Dennis,

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Library and Museum of Freemasonry

For more information about The Library and Museum of Freemasonry please visit the website.

freemasonry.london.museum/

Images © The Library and Museum of Freemasonry 2004

The Shelter Archive

In the late 1960s Shelter commissioned photographer Nick Hedges to document poor housing conditions across Britain. The powerful black and white images that resulted from this collaboration showed the harsh reality of life in slums and properties “unfit for habitation” around 1970. Hedges’ images placed real people at the centre of the frame, emphasising the poor quality of life that the housing crisis was inflicting.


The Shelter Archive of photographs by Nick Hedges (collection number 1983-5235) at the National Media Museum contains 1,000 of these images as well as Hedges’ photographer’s notes from 1969 to 1970 providing a detailed vision of the severity of the housing crisis at the time and the process of Hedges’ work as photographer. Hedges’ notes describe his impressions and experiences of visiting cities and meeting families in dire straits from Glasgow to Bradford to London. He writes both of the injustice they face and the everyday details of their lives, which are often inescapably intertwined.

Shelter was established in 1966 with the aims of raising money and awareness to help those living in these shocking housing conditions. At the time 3 million people lived in slums with no legal protection from landlords. One of Shelter’s first campaigns “Face the Facts” challenged the official numbers of homelessness in Britain as they did not include the thousands of people living in housing deemed “unfit for habitation”. The Shelter Archive also provides documentary photography by Hedges of these early campaigns, including “Face the Facts” and the Liverpool Shelter Neighbourhood Action project (1969-72). “SNAP” worked with the people who were living in slums to build the housing that they needed.

The Shelter Archive preserves both the history of housing conditions in 1960s - 1970s Britain and the actions that charities such as Shelter took to dispel the myth that homeless people only lived on the streets. The Archive is available to view by appointment at the National Media Museum.

Photographs from the Shelter Archive were shown in the exhibition Make Life worth Living: Nick Hedges’ photographs for Shelter 1968-72 at the Science Museum in 2014/2015.

Images courtesy of The Shelter Archive of photographs by Nick Hedges, The National Media Museum / SSPL

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‘The rubbish surrounding the basement flat of the R’s flat’ by Nick Hedges

In London E1 in August 1969 he writes how

“The Rumps lived in the basement [at Rothschild Dwellings], in a state of perpetual gloom, the electric light burned continuously, with rubbish chutes and dustbins crowding around the passage way to their flat... the flat really was a hole, a cave, oppressive and restrictive to mind and body... numerous requests for re-housing had been made, particularly in the last year since one of the twins had a whole in his heart.”

Hedges’ detailed captions further ground these images in the everyday realities of those living through the housing crisis. In Birmingham, on Hedges’ first commission for Shelter, one caption describes how

“Mr and Mrs M and their four children lived in a council owned house in Vincent Crescent, Balsall Heath. Apart from the poor state of the property:- no bathroom, no hot water, outside lavatory, inside walls running with damp - these children were sleeping in the middle of winter, on two sodden seat cushions covered by a couple of old ‘macs’, there was no heating in the room, the snow lay thick outside and the windows were broken.”



‘Mr and Mrs M and their four children lived in a council owned house...’ by Nick Hedges



Facts Not Opinions at the Kirkaldy Testing Works

The Kirkaldy Testing Museum is an unusual and fascinating site in central London, just behind Tate Modern in Southwark's Bankside. It is a 19th century workshop with the 47ft, 116 ton testing machine intact. As yet it remains uncluttered with pop-up restaurants or craft brewers. Thanks to the help of the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society (GLIAS) it has been open as a museum since 1983.

David Kirkaldy

The works were built by David Kirkaldy. He worked as a draughtsman at Robert Napier's Vulcan Foundry in Glasgow who served ship-builders on the Clyde. From 1858 he undertook experiments at Napier's on materials used for high-pressure boilers.

He resigned from the company in 1861 so he could follow his passion for materials testing. By 1863 he had designed and patented his universal testing machine and in 1866 opened his London testing works. David Kirkaldy



David Kirkaldy

built up a reputation for meticulous work very much on his own terms. He was employed to perform tests on part of the failed Tay Bridge in 1880 but was not part of the formal Board of Enquiry. A copy of the Tay Bridge Report at the museum includes his own red marginalia reading 'Lies!!!' What was effectively his slogan, 'Facts Not Opinions' can still be seen over the grand entrance of 99 Southwark Street. His obituary read 'Cautious to a degree; enthusiastic past belief; honest as the Sun; outspoken and fearless as a Viking'.

The Kirkaldy Testing Works

Kirkaldy's machine was built by Greenwood & Batley of Leeds, 'for the purposes of testing all kinds of constructive materials, and that under various stresses, namely, Pulling, Thrusting, Bending, Twisting, Shearing, Punching, and Bulging'. The machine was 'a million pound machine', able to exert a force of 1,000,000lb (450 tonnes). It was powered by water pressure, originally from a steam engine and from 1905, the London Hydraulic Power Company. Kirkaldy's first business using the machine was in The Grove, Southwark from 1866. One of the very first jobs undertaken was to measure the materials used for the construction of the new Blackfriars Bridge including the cement, bricks, granite, wrought and cast iron and timber for temporary struts. By the 1870s new premises were needed and on 1st January 1874 the works reopened at 99 Southwark Street.

Kirkaldy Testing Works tested a wide range of structures and materials including samples from the Hammersmith suspension bridge designed by Joseph Bazalgette, concrete cubes, stone, brick, glazed earthenware sewer pipes, tiles, chains, rope, wire, manila, hemp and fabrics. After David Kirkaldy's death, the works was run by first his son and later his grandson. More recent testing included

the cables which suspended the Skylon in the 1951 Festival of Britain and parts of the de Havilland Comet aircraft that crashed off Elba in 1954. In 1965 the last David Kirkaldy sold the works to Traharne & Davies Ltd. who continued testing on the site until 1974.



The Kirkaldy Testing Museum

Members of the GLIAS first visited the works in the 1970s. The building with its universal testing machine had been awarded a Grade 2 listing in 1971, which was upgraded to 2* listing in 2014.

The museum finally opened in 1983. During the early years the main focus was to get the universal testing machine going. Highly knowledgeable and active volunteers redeployed 19th century equipment, including ceiling chain hoists, to recreate the works in its original state. Space in the basement was given over to various enthusiasts, including model train builders.

The museum's aims have not changed since the original opening in 1983:

- To promote and preserve for the benefit of the public the original Kirkaldy Testing Machine
- To demonstrate and explain the Kirkaldy Testing Machine's role in developing quality control techniques for constructional materials
- To undertake research and contribute to published knowledge on the history of materials testing
- To hold tours, demonstrations, displays to reflect the history of Kirkaldy's Testing Works and the history of materials testing

It has been in the interpretation of the aims, and intrusion of individuals' personal interests, that museum activities have varied over the past 30 years. The huge job to get the machine in working order meant visitors were originally of much lower priority. The workshops in the basement became a place where like-minded people could meet together, work together and discuss their projects –rather like an early hspace.

As one volunteer from the 1990s described it,

'The museum did not actually need visitors. It opened one day per month for the casual visitors and at other times for by special arrangement for groups. There was no advertising, even the notice on the front door with the opening hours was so small one had to go right up to the door to read it.'

Subsequent volunteers had a testing background and links to major organisations such as Imperial College Mechanical Engineering Department combined with acquisitive tendencies led to an increasing number of testing machines being donated to the works. While the larger machines were listed and numbered, smaller pieces were not considered so important, leading to a mixing of original works items and newer objects brought in, with no clear way of distinguishing them. Interpretation has been added to over the years, largely by individuals, leading to a spread of labels and information sheets over many surfaces in the museum.

Crisis

In 2012 the 25 year term peppercorn lease expired, the window to renew was missed and new landlords demanding commercial rates came on the scene. At the same time many of the original volunteers had become unable to help out through age and infirmity. Suddenly the museum needed to find new volunteers, make money


and become a viable business fast. A charge was made for entry and tours and visitors became fundamental to the museum. Volunteers no longer were able to have long lunchtimes in the basement but had to work, taking visitors around the building to supplement the idiosyncratic interpretation. Partnerships became crucial to the survival of the museum.

Where now?

The museum is now at a turning point. A small band of volunteers runs tours and entertains visitors, but as their numbers increase new things need to be considered. Should the focus be the story of Kirkaldy or the story of material testing (or both)? What are the differences when demonstrating to 20 people instead of just one? What should happen to the basement space? And what should be done with the smaller testing machines littering the works?

David Kirkaldy was a man of specific and unique ideas which have since become universal. At the Kirkaldy Testing Museum we have a similar challenge –how can we preserve the unique nature of the place and collections while expanding our audience base and becoming more accessible.

As a social history curator with an interest in industrial heritage I began volunteering at the museum in 2014. Initially I just wanted to run and talk about some really big machines but inevitably I have been drawn in to work with the trustees. Any suggestions, ideas or if you'd like to help please write to me at roz@testingmuseum.org.uk

 Roz Currie





Voices from the Workhouse a contemporary approach at Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse

Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse is a much loved, family friendly museum. Across the 50 acre site there is an adventure playground and traditional working farm with animals so it is perhaps not surprising that 70% of visitors come with children. We wanted the new workhouse galleries to appeal to our family audience, attracting and inspiring children, their parents and their grandparents. Through years of research from original archives we knew a lot about Gressenhall Workhouse and the people who lived and worked here. We wanted to tell the true story of the workhouse and used projections and graphics to tell over 40 stories. Much of our nationally important workhouse collection is on display for the first time including scales, wooden bowls, re-useable coffins and iron beds. This project also aimed to put the workhouse into context, exploring how people who needed help were given assistance both before and after the Victorian period. The galleries also ask visitors to consider what happens today. The 'Voices from the Workhouse' project

was funded by Heritage Lottery Fund, DCMS/Wolfson Museums & Galleries Improvement Fund, Breckland District Council, Friends of Gressenhall and Norfolk County Council.

High tech projections

The galleries now include cutting edge technology allowing visitors to 'meet' real people from the workhouse's history through sophisticated projections. When visitors enter the workhouse galleries they are met by Thomas Bilham, workhouse porter. He addresses visitors as if they were workhouse inmates. Later on in the galleries visitors meet Masters of the Workhouse, Robert Bradfield the schoolmaster and Harriet Kettle a workhouse inmate.

These projections offer a dramatic and unexpected way to portray information. They often direct visitors to the next gallery and aid route finding and visitor flow. Curatorial and Learning staff worked together to write scripts based on historical

information gathered from our research. Portraying the characters through these projections allow us to share these stories and workhouse gossip in a dramatic, interesting and exciting way. However we avoided the 'disneyfication' of the galleries and did not want to alienate traditional museum visitors. We worked hard to source realistic costumes and were present at filming to ensure accuracy and authenticity.

The voices and histories of members of staff and of inmates, of those responsible for the running of the workhouse and of those for whom it provided the only safety net in difficult times, breathe real life into the facts and statistics.

The new workhouse galleries and projections have been well received by visitors, comments have included: *'The new displays are poignantly presented and fascinating'*

'I'm so impressed with a more interactive museum. My children absolutely loved it!'

'Fabulous improvements to workhouse - love interactive projections.'

'Standard of workhouse displays really improved and great for all ages.'

Contemporary relevance

A key aim of the project was to put the workhouse in context. The galleries should encourage visitors to consider the issues that the workhouse addressed and how we address them today.

Each introduction panel includes a boxed section of contemporary relevance text, featuring statements and questions to encourage visitors to consider the theme within modern life such as 'How can we tell who really needs our help today? If it is too easy for people to get benefits they may take advantage. If it is too hard people may suffer' and 'Where would you go if you needed a bed for the night? On the street, to a hostel or on a friend's sofa?'

Although this was the hardest aspect of the gallery text to write, it was also the most rewarding. It was challenging because any references to current benefits or welfare situations would quickly date. We wanted to use lots of questions to prompt visitors to think about what they would do in that situation or what they think about these topics today.

One gallery 'Looking after the Poor' considers how the workhouse regime changed and how opinions about looking after the poor changed. In this gallery visitors are asked to reflect and respond on contemporary issues relating to the workhouse. A board in this gallery is regularly updated with current headlines



and extracts from contemporary news reports relating to workhouse themes. This has included 'Norwich is not a fine city for everyone. Many wouldn't realise that Norwich has some of the highest rates of child poverty in the country.' (Eastern Daily Press, 13th June 2016) 'Mike Ashley running Sports Direct like 'Victorian Workhouse' (The Guardian, 22nd July 2016) and 'Poverty in the UK: Three jobs and still poor' (BBC News, 5th September 2016)

In this space there are also relevant charity leaflets, this year we had food bank and shelter leaflets with a large number picked up by visitors.

The galleries allow for visitors to respond to these contemporary themes. Visitors are asked to respond to these questions - 'Who needs our help? What is the best way to support each other? How should we look after

poor and vulnerable people?' - by putting their views on a comment wall. This opportunity has been well received by visitors. They took the opportunity to share their thoughts and pose questions. Visitors have drawn comparisons and contrasts between definitions of poverty and treatment of the poor today and at the time of the workhouse. Many of the comments appear to be written by children, with many taking a 'Robin Hood' view of the taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Some of the comments reflect the political nature of 2016 with mentions for the EU referendum and refugee crisis. Overall, comments focus on compassion, kindness and giving.

With debates about austerity, welfare and social justice hitting the headlines every day, workhouse history has never been more relevant. Throughout the new galleries, visitors are invited to reflect on connections between the historical past and key issues facing society today, with the intention of challenging pre-conceptions about what life was like in the workhouse and opening up debate. We are now exploring ways to continue this debate and how we can empower visitors to do more to help.



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To Clean or Not to Clean morning session

As a Curator for History at Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, one of my remits is caring for the Social History Collection. I have some experience in conservation cleaning, but this is mainly in the cleaning of buildings and larger objects rather than small objects for display. Therefore when the course 'To Clean or not to Clean' with the Social History Curators Group was advertised, I jumped at the chance to attend. I wasn't to be disappointed either.

Libbey Finney, Conservator for the Museum of London introduced the subject of cleaning through a PowerPoint slideshow and showed images of objects that we could recognise from our own collections. We discussed the controversy around cleaning and how objects could sometimes be restored rather than conserved, which raised an interesting debate.

Libbey gave a relatable example of showing images of the queen: a 'before' image of the Queen in her Coronation, as well as an 'after', more recent image. This was to provoke



thought about how an object can look shiny and new to begin with, but can age well, being preserved to remain in a good condition. Although very amusing, the point was made that objects should not necessarily be cleaned to look shiny and new, in fact

we should conserve them to keep their own history.

The morning continued with examples shown of what we should keep in a cleaning kit, and the theory of how to clean was explained and demonstrated by Libbey. As a group, we then undertook a condition report and description of objects from Hackney Museum's Collection laid out in front of us before we would clean them in the afternoon ahead. I felt I learnt a lot from this session, and Libbey's sense of humour kept the session feeling fresh and interesting.



SHC Louise Hannam

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To Clean or Not to Clean afternoon session

The afternoon gave us all the chance to put the morning's theory into practice. First, we started with dry cleaning. After condition checking and armed with masks, brushes and smoke sponges, we set to work. A hush descended on the room, as we diligently attended to our objects.

My first object was a cash drawer from Hackney Museum's social history collection. Each time, I looked at the object to condition check; I noticed more and more of its story – from the graffiti left by its previous owners to its now quiet bell.



Equipped with a wide angled brush, I slowly removed a layer of dust. It took some time before I noticed a difference. Keeping track of where I was, was just one challenge. Looking around the room, I realised I had one of the easier objects. Shoe lasts were much more difficult to clean. They also provided a lesson in how not to mistake actual use of the objects for woodworm. It underlined



the importance of judgement calls in conserving objects.

Wet cleaning was a slightly messier challenge. We learnt how to make cotton buds, which was trickier than I had anticipated a vital tool in this kind of work. I set to work on a crystal dish with accretions in its base. After using detergent and rinsing in three times, it was a test in memory, but it was much easier to see the impact you were having.

The day taught me a lot about how my conservator colleagues look at objects. As a curator working in large organisation, sometimes it is difficult to understand the length of time required for conservation. After walking in their shoes for a short time, I have a newfound respect for the patience and mind-set they have, working on objects for hours at a time. Libby and her team were great at dispensing advice, such as using plastazote to help turn objects around, and tips on the best way to



use cotton buds. The resource pack afterwards was great – if this course is run again, go, - it was the best day's training I have ever been to.

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Abolition reticule

Whilst locating objects for our current exhibition, *Completing the Look: 300 Years of Fashion Accessories*, I came across this abolition reticule and I was immediately intrigued.

The reticule is a beautiful but very delicate object. It is made from unlined pale pink silk with a drawstring at the top. On one side, the image of a seated male slave with his two children has been painted in black. On the reverse, there is a poem entitled 'The Slaves' Address to British Ladies', which reads:

'Mothers of the fair and brave
Heavy is the debt you owe
For the sufferings of the slave
Thro' an age of pain and woe.
Shall your sons with freedom blest
Be the oppressors of our race
As I plead, each noble breast
Kindles at the foul disgrace.
Torn from Afric's sunny plains
By your fathers' cruelty
We have groaned in heavy chains
We have pined in misery.
But a brighter day is near
Blessings by your justice given
Faithful wives & children dear
And the hope of Joy in Heaven.
We shall bless your holy zeal
In our lisping girls & boys
For we have a heart to feel
All a parent's anxious joys.
We shall see the harvests wave
And the sweets of science know
Freemen - at the name of Slave
Shall our souls indignant glow.'

The reticule was made in the 1820s by a female campaign group, to raise funds and awareness for the anti-slavery movement. Although Britain officially ended its participation in the slave trade in 1807, slavery continued in the British Empire and

in 1823, William Wilberforce formed the Anti-Slavery Society to campaign for the end of slavery in the colonies. Whilst women were allowed to join the society, they could not form part of its leadership, so a group of women in West Bromwich formed their own group, the Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves (later called the Female Society for Birmingham). Other groups formed across the country shortly after and by 1831, there were 73 female organisations campaigning for the immediate and full abolition of slavery.



Many of these groups produced objects such as bags, jewellery, prints and pin cushions, decorated with abolitionist emblems, images and text, which were sold or distributed as part of their campaigns. Silk bags and reticules like the one in our collection were filled with campaign pamphlets and newspaper cuttings and distributed to prominent people, including King George IV and Princess Victoria, as well as to other women's anti-slavery societies.

We currently have no provenance for the object but it is likely that this reticule was made by the Female Society for Birmingham. It is very similar to reticules made by the society in the collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, and the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington DC. However, I have yet to find another example matching this particular design. As we continue

with our documentation plan, I hope that we will find the reticule listed in one of our 20 accession registers and that we will be able to clarify its provenance.

Although we currently cannot be certain how the reticule came to be donated to Saffron Walden Museum, it is possible that it was donated by a member of one of the prominent Quaker families resident in Saffron Walden in the nineteenth century. The abolition movement in Britain was established by the Religious

Society of Friends, or Quakers, who believe that all people are created equal (and therefore one person cannot be owned by another). It is possible that members of Quaker families in Saffron Walden, such as the Tuke and the Fry families, were involved in the movement and that one of them donated the reticule to the newly-formed Saffron Walden Museum in the 1830s.

Sadly, the reticule is too fragile to be displayed in *Completing the Look: 300 Years of Fashion Accessories* but I hope to apply for a grant to pay for conservation work to enable us to display it in the future. The exhibition features other Georgian reticules and runs at Saffron Walden Museum until 30 July 2017.

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Big Camera at Gallery Oldham

A chance conversation with an artist in 2015 led to a new lease of life for an object from our collections. It also started a chain of events that saw us gain a wealth of extra knowledge about the object, an ACE grant, some sponsorship and even a new temporary exhibition whilst at the same time dramatically improving my van-driving skills!

Artist and photographer Ian Beesley has been working with Gallery Oldham in recent years to document an ongoing project to restore our original 1883 home. He was fascinated by an old process camera in our collections that had not been on display for almost two decades. It had come from a local wallpaper manufacturer and was a large object with quite a complex history making it difficult to display. Ian suggested that he could use the camera to take new images.

It was an attractive idea but we initially had to assess how much risk this would bring for the camera. To begin with the main task was to clean the camera, especially inside the bellows. I was worried about making alterations to the object but we agreed to document all changes and to use a specialist to restore the lens which had been fixed to one focal length when in use at the wallpaper factory by the brutal act of inserting a screw.

For Ian the main challenge of using the camera was coping with a dark slide designed for huge negatives 24 inches square. His solution was to create a grid within the slide which could take smaller 5"x4" negatives resulting in images made up of 20 separate prints. The camera has no shutter so photographs are taken simply by removing the lens cap.



Because of these inexact (and often quite long) exposures Ian was not able to use colour film. However even with black and white film each shot proved quite expensive and it was also a time consuming business as Ian had to load the dark slide each time by revisiting his darkroom.

At first we only took still life photographs within the museum store. The next step was to take the camera out on the road. The main body of the camera sits on a cast iron carriage which when in situ moves along a track. During the cleaning process we spent a couple of days dismantling the camera and learnt that the wooden body would lift off in one (heavy) piece. We could transport this in a transit van and soon realised that with a little modification the van could also double as a darkroom enabling the slides to be reloaded out in the field. This upped our productivity to taking as many as three images in one day! The main issue was finding things to photograph from the back of a van and often involved some interesting reversing manoeuvres to line up the shot.

Having got this far we made a bid to ACE for funding and also contacted film makers Ilford and the original manufacturers of the camera, Hunter Penrose. All three were very supportive of the idea of an exhibition and so we began to actively feature the travels of the camera on our social media streams. We also visited

a number of public events such as the Manchester Histories Festival where we displayed the camera and chatted to visitors about its use. As an object it proved a great attraction and conversation starter, especially about the process of photography. This work led to several former employees of Rome Mill contacting us and the uncovering of some of the negatives and rollers originally produced by the camera at the wallpaper factory.



The resulting exhibition - The Big Big Camera - opened in early 2017. The project has created a great deal of interest in a once overlooked object which means that when the new Oldham Heritage Centre opens in a couple of years' time the camera will be on display once more rather than left in store.



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