SHCG NEWS
SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP
Issue 82 April 2019

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Using Facebook as part of Hackney Archives

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Welcome to Issue 82 of SHCG News

With SHCG elections coming up, I am shocked to discover I've already been editing the News for 2 years!

What has happened in those two years? And what, ostensibly, has not happened? For one thing, SHCG has become an important part of my life, both professionally and personally. Being able to draw on a network of committed, engaging and curious people constantly helps me refresh and stimulate my understanding of and passion for the sector, especially having made a recent sideways step into art curation.

But it is partly working in an art gallery that has made me see even more how the community-focused ethos of social history in museums underpins practice in all versions of the museum or gallery. This is why in SHCG we constantly emphasise the fact that you don't need to be a social history curator to be involved in social history. The conscientious amongst us, one way or another, are always doing this. Social history is not so much a subject as a methodology. Just as museums cannot be neutral, they cannot forget social history's practical benefits.

In editing this Newsletter, and thus in writing this welcome each issue, I am pushed to reflect on the exceptional work that continues despite social, political and financial turmoil. Whether it's working out how to fit an exhibition into a multi-purpose space at the Royal College of Physicians, using Facebook for documentation purposes, or simply enjoying the touch of humour in a cow-shaped creamer, our work offers a wealth of challenges and joys. The more we work together, support one another and share these experiences as practitioners, the more we can benefit our visitors. This is SHCG's vision, and with this in mind I strongly encourage all of you to consider running as trustees to keep bringing this vision into reality. Perhaps next time, you'll be the one writing this letter.

Jessie Petheram
Editor, SHCG News
E: jessie.petheram@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk

Front cover image
Face(book) to Face at Hackney Archives page 8

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Join SHCG?

If you're reading this and you're not a member of SHCG but would like to join please contact:

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Membership Secretary
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T: 020 8356 3500
E: membershipshcg@gmail.com

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: Friday 6th September 2019

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 contact the News editor to discuss your ideas.

Send all contributions to:

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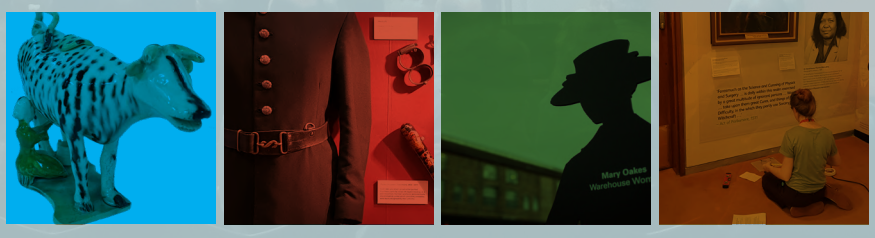
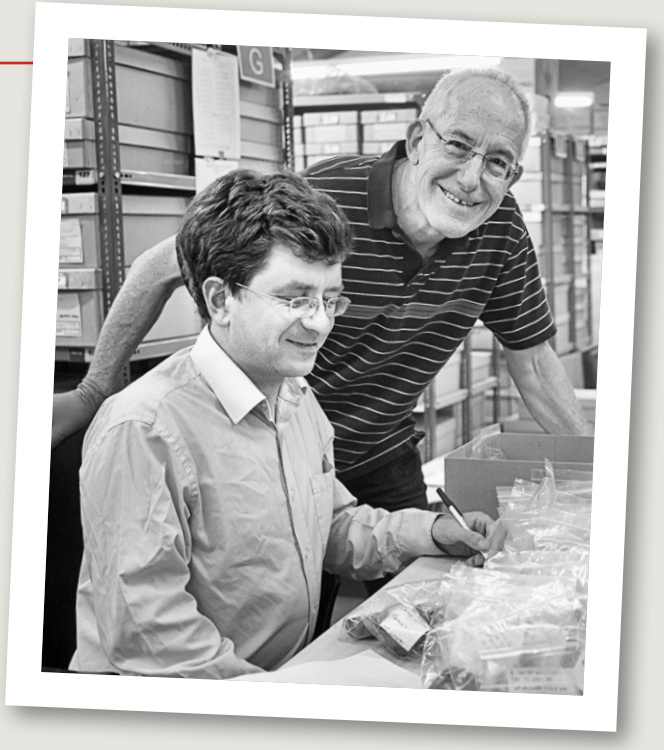


Background image: MIRN seminar, St Cecilia's Hall, Concert Room, Edinburgh.

Obituary: Andrew Longworth (1978–2018), Curatorial Assistant, Guildford Heritage Services



Andrew working alongside volunteer, Nick ©Nick Bale

Andrew Longworth was a social historian through and through. He believed passionately in telling and preserving the stories of ordinary people. Although he was a quiet and gentle man, Andrew was never afraid to speak up if something needed to be said.

Andrew grew up in Bolton, Lancashire, with his parents and two sisters. After school, he initially thought he might become a teacher before changing his mind and taking up a History degree at Stirling. He went on to study Museum Studies at Newcastle University, passing with Merit.

After his MA, Andrew went first to the Hancock Museum as Curatorial Assistant and then Peterborough Museum where he undertook front and back of house roles, ultimately resulting in a strong preference for collections care. He joined Guildford Heritage Service in 2013 as Curatorial Assistant where we benefited from his dedication, kindness and sense of humour.

Andrew was a superb historian, both at work and in his personal life where he pursued his family history avidly. He preferred accuracy above all else and enjoyed solving puzzles for enquirers and exhibitions, which he did with quiet good humour. His knowledge of abundant and sometimes surprising subjects helped us to succeed in many a pub quiz. He was an adept teller of stories.

Tragically, in September 2018, Andrew took his own life. I am certain that Andrew would prefer to be open about this – honesty and integrity were of paramount importance to him.

Our Bolton lad was buried on a windswept hillside on 21st September, on a day that was sometimes sunny, sometimes rainy. This followed a beautiful service at the grand and historic Bolton Parish Church (a cathedral in all but name) to the sounds of 80s pop music – his favourite.

The family's choice of church was perfect in so many ways: Bolton Parish Church stands atop Saxon foundations in the heart of the oldest part of Bolton, so would have been seen by the generations of Andrew's family that he came to know so well through his genealogical research. The church itself seemed fitting as it is significant but not imposing. This sums up Andrew's work rather well: always certain in his approach, but never self-important.

The SHCG website says that the Group was formed, '*to improve the status and provision of social history in museums, and the standards of collections research, display and interpretation'*. I can honestly say that Andrew did this every single day of his working life.

Andrew is survived by his parents, sisters, two nephews and a loving extended family, as well as his colleagues and friends from the museums in which he has worked. He is deeply missed.

www.samaritans.org/
www.cruse.org.uk/

Catriona Wilson
Collections Manager, Guildford Museum
(Guildford Borough Council)

Andrew inside the museum store ©Guildford Borough Council

Join SHCG committee!

Are you an early or mid-career professional working in a museum or heritage site? Are you looking to enhance your skills or find new opportunities to do something different?

SHCG is looking for new Trustees this year and you may be who we are looking for. There are a variety of posts available and opportunities to get involved with SHCG's core activities and contribute to our work supporting social history in museums.

Make a difference to the museum sector! Fantastic CPD opportunities await!

What some previous committee members have said...

"It has broadened my experience and professional development"

"It made me realise how much I enjoyed organising which helped me step up my career. It has made me a more confident decision maker in my day job."

"I can call many fellow SHCGers friends, and continue to value their help, advice and inspiration!"

"It gave me increased confidence in organising events, chairing meetings and negotiating with other organisations."

"Ultimately it led to my current job, looking after social history collections!"

"You can often get caught up in your own organisation and the way things are done. SHCG always helped to give good external perspectives."

We are looking to fill the following roles this year:

- **Web Editor x 1**
- **Marketing and Partnerships Officer x 1**
- **Seminar Organiser x 1**
- **News Editor x 1**
- **Treasurer x 1**
  (Please note this role is a 3-year term)
- **Secretary x 1**
  (Please note this role is a 3-year term)

New committee members are appointed at the AGM each year as part of the SHCG conference – this year's AGM will be held at City Art Centre, Museums & Galleries Edinburgh on Thursday 18 July 2019.

Ordinary Trustees serve two years and can have various roles which are assigned at the first meeting after AGM.

Please note the cost of travel to committee meetings (3 per year) for trustees is covered by SHCG. This does not include attendance at conference as a Trustee.

Please direct questions to:
enquirySHCG@gmail.com

SHCG owes a debt of gratitude to the many people over the years who have served on committee

As we approach AGM and the election of new Trustees, here are some reflections from past and present with the latest batch of outgoing trustees...

Name: **Jenny Noble**

Position/s held: **Treasurer**

Years served: **3 years**

Why did you want to become a trustee?

I've been an SHCG member since being appointed in a curatorial role in 2009. I was hooked after attending my first SHCG event that summer (the 35th Anniversary Conference in Leeds and York) and, since then, I've missed only three days of conference! I felt I'd gained so much from SHCG, from useful tips to lasting friendships, that it was time to give something back by standing as a trustee.

What did you gain from it?

Being part of such a warm and welcoming committee has been a pleasure. The post of treasurer can be demanding at times but SHCG is a very supportive group and there's a certain satisfaction in getting to grips with figure-filled spreadsheets! Contributing to conference planning and other activities is also a great way to get involved in topical discussions about different areas of museum practice and the role of social history.

What has been the highlight?

Despite some (very) early starts and long, coffee-fuelled journeys from Scotland to attend committee meetings, I've absolutely loved travelling to towns and cities across the UK and getting a peek at some fantastic museums, historic sites and other cultural venues.

Where would you like to SHCG go in the future?

I think museums of the future probably need to be a bit braver in their approach to ensuring that crucial issues like equality, diversity and sustainability underpin their work. Social history is an amazing tool that can be used to effect change so I'd love SHCG to play a pivotal role in working with the museum sector to achieve this.

Name: **Leah Mellors**

Position/s held: **Marketing and Partnerships Officer**

Years served: **2 years**

Why did you want to become a trustee?

I have been a member of SHCG for almost as long as I've worked in museums and I've benefitted from the email list, newsletter, journal and conference. I wanted to give something back and help others benefit from the group too. I also wanted to demonstrate my commitment to the museum sector and make sure I had a wider perspective than just the museum that I work for.

What did you gain from it?

A network of colleagues and peers; skills and experience of marketing; and a much greater awareness of the work and effort that goes into running a subject specialist network. I've also visited museums and towns/cities that I've never been before and learned about how other people are approaching the challenges and opportunities of working in the sector.

What has been the highlight?

Hard to pick just one, I think organising seminars with other Subject Specialist Networks (SSN's) and sector support organisations, has been a real highlight for me. I think it's important to promote SHCG to a wider audience and to work with others to support our members.

Where would you like to SHCG go in the future?

The 2018 conference at Beamish and the Great North Museum: Hancock was a highlight. The SHCG conference is always enjoyable, friendly and informative and it was great to have contributed to the success of it, even in just a small way through marketing it.

Name: **Diana Morton**

Position/s held: **Web Editor**

Years served: **2 years**

Why did you want to become a trustee?

I was interested in the work of SHCG and wanted to gain new experience. I thought this was a great opportunity to network too.

What did you gain from it?

I have learned how to edit a website, run social media campaigns, manage a Jiscmail list as well as meeting lots of wonderful people and visiting lots of museums!

What has been the highlight?

Running Museum Hour on Twitter was definitely a highlight. It was very exciting and fast-paced! Also the 2018 conference was an amazing experience.

Where would you like to SHCG go in the future?

Speaking as Web Editor, to develop our digital offer further and update our website. More widely, I would like SHCG to go from strength to strength and flourish in the future.

Name: **Holly Trubshawe**

Position/s held: **Seminar Organiser**

Years served: **3 years (2 terms)**

Why did you want to become a trustee?

As the only full time paid employee in my organisation I wanted to become a trustee to boost my networks and my social history knowledge as well as to gain some more experience organising events through being a Seminar Organiser.

What did you gain from it?

Lots of friends and contacts. SHCG Trustees are a really friendly and supportive group and it's been lovely to be a part of it. I've also built on my organisation skills through organising seminars for our members.

What has been the highlight?

Hard to pick just one, I think organising seminars with other Subject Specialist Networks (SSN's) and sector support organisations, has been a real highlight for me. I think it's important to promote SHCG to a wider audience and to work with others to support our members.

Where would you like to SHCG go in the future?

To support our members with training, resources and events as well as to continue to work collaboratively with others both in the sector and outside to help support and promote Social History in museums.

There are a number of Trustee positions open this year which are always interesting, career enhancing roles.

If you're interested in standing as a Trustee in this year's elections, please contact Verity Smith on: enquirySHCG@gmail.com or turn to page 5 for details.

Face(book) to Face

"Everybody's nana is on Facebook" said the council's communications officer in our first meeting to discuss using Facebook as part of Hackney Archives' 'Changing Faces, Hidden Stories' project (funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund).

The project aims to digitise and share the archive of photographic negatives from RA Gibson's, a well known photography studio which operated in Clapton, east London between 1952 and 1989. Hackney Archives holds an estimated 150,000 negatives from the studio, spanning a 26 year period from 1952. The collection is dominated by weddings and studio portraits but includes a wide range of other events including parties, community groups and scenes from around Hackney. The collection is a wonderful social history resource which captures the post-war changes in Hackney as different communities moved in and out of the area. In the 1950s many of the photographs feature bar mitzvahs and synagogue weddings, whilst in the 1970s the vast majority of people in the photographs are either South Asian or African Caribbean.

We envisaged Facebook as a way to share the images and to trace the people in them. One of the project's goals is to talk to people in the photographs so that the personal histories recorded and preserved by Hackney Archives reflect the diverse communities who have shaped Hackney's history. There was an immediate threshold question of what images we would put online. Many of the photos taken by Gibson were taken at public events but the majority were only intended for the mantelpiece or to be sent to family overseas. There is an obvious sensitivity with wedding photographs (which make up about 80% of the collection) since the couple may have divorced or otherwise separated. We needed to balance our wish to share the images (and the public's desire to see them) with the possibility that some people might not want their image to be made public. Once the images are online, it is of course hard to control how or where they are disseminated. On the other hand, limitations of time, space and money mean that we could never make available more than a few hundred images using analogue methods.

We consulted the Gibson advisory panel which includes people who appear in the collection, Gibson's daughter and members of the local community (part of a long term process of consultation and engagement as we seek to embed participatory practices in our work). The panel advocated an incremental approach, putting non-wedding photographs online first. It was later agreed that a group shot from each wedding would be uploaded giving people the chance to identify their photographs without the direct focus of a bride and groom image. The reason for this was that not making the wedding photos public at all would mean that a large section of the collection which featured African Caribbean communities would be excluded from view, since these communities tend to appear mainly in wedding and studio shots in the 1970s rather than the earlier 'Hackney life' scenes.

It was also agreed that the images would be watermarked and accompanied by a take down statement. At the start of the project there was some internal discussion as to where the 'Hackney

Archives' watermark should be: centre or corner? I argued for the corner so the image wasn't affected (I was being precious). Other (wiser) staff members argued for the centre to make it harder for the watermark to be removed. They were right. Our responsibility to the people in the photos means our priority must be to ensure that an image can be traced back to us. We also have a take down statement which accompanies each photo. We've tried a few variations but our current one states:

'If you have concerns that this image should not be made public please contact Hackney Archives.'

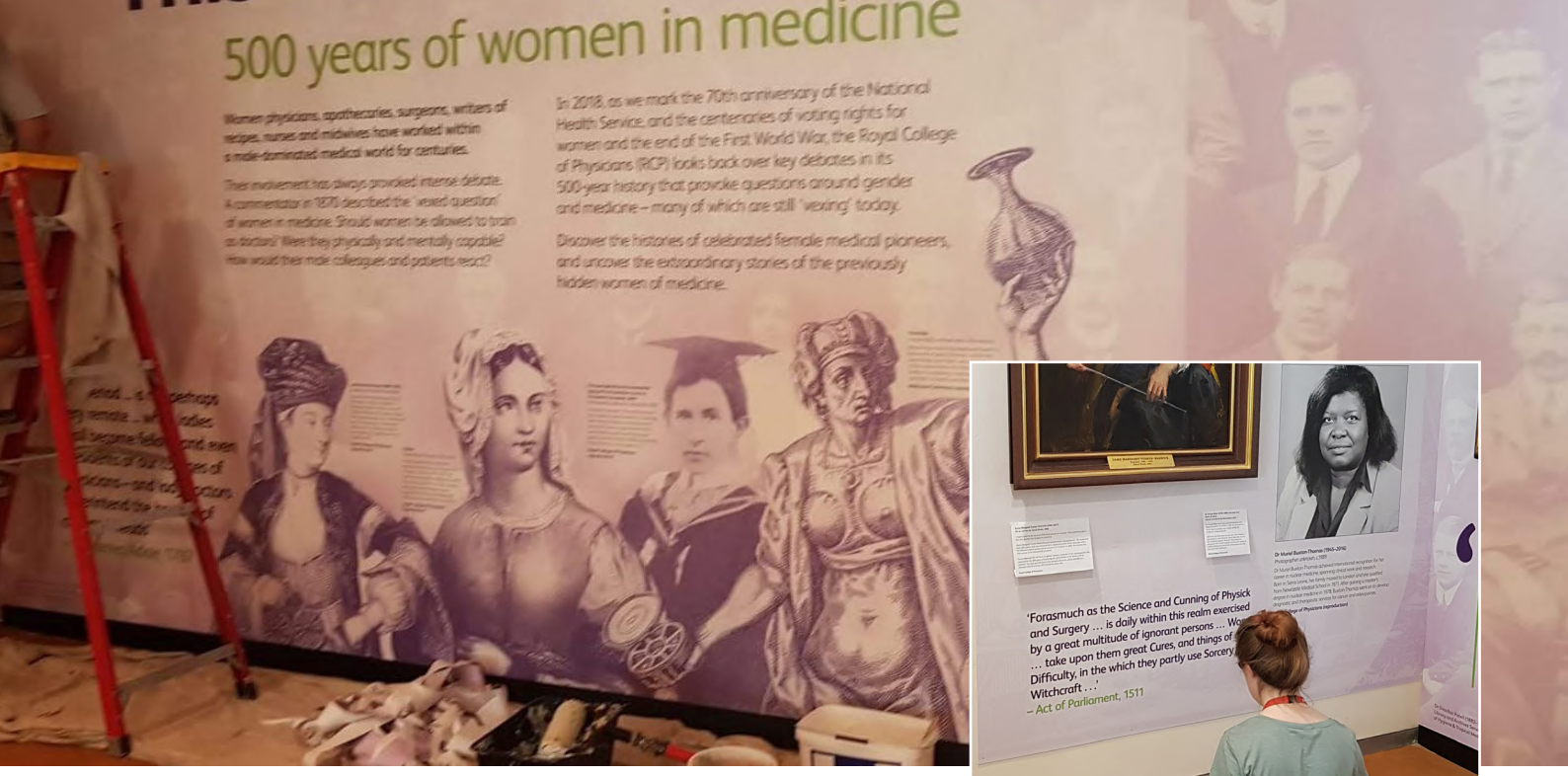
It is basic and short but quick to read and (hopefully) easy to understand. We're working on a new version at the moment which will say why we are publishing the images.

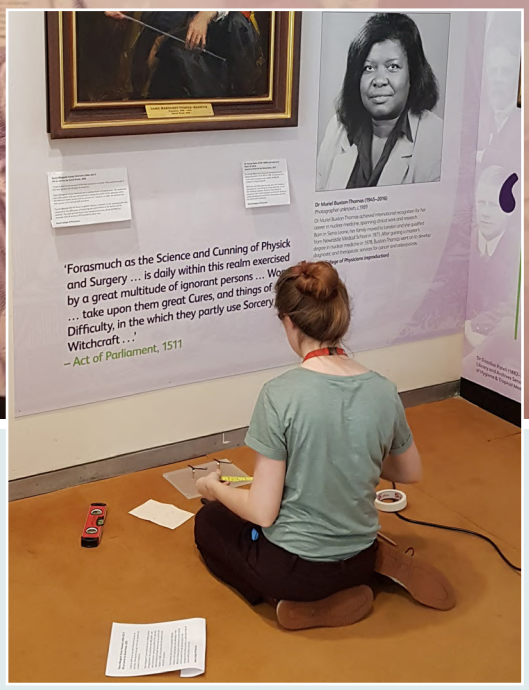
Facebook has in our experience proved to be the most useful of the social media platforms we use (we also use Twitter and Flickr), perhaps because it has an older demographic (as succinctly highlighted by our comms person). We use our Facebook page to share the images (usually as an album), ask for information and invite comments. We usually share our post to other Facebook groups depending on the subject in order to reach a greater number of people. We've found that the comments section below the photographs becomes a space not just for people to offer information about the photograph itself but to share memories of the local area, to reconnect with old friends and to share the photographs with friends and family. We've been able to trace people in the photographs, including one man who spotted his 17 year old self dancing in one of our earliest photos from 1952. We've also found that people love being asked to help and we've had great success asking people to identify long gone cinemas, pubs and churches (although we famously had 15 different suggestions for the identity of a kosher restaurant in one of the photographs!).

Unfortunately not all our experiences have been happy ones. Our most popular set of photos is that of a Sikh wedding which unfortunately also attracted a couple of racist comments. It highlighted the risk factors in sharing photographs with other Facebook group pages since we were not able to delete one of the comments which had been made on another page. We also received a phone call from a woman who was understandably very distressed to see a studio portrait of herself and her late brother online. As only a tiny percentage of the images have been identified we did not know that her brother had died as a boy. We apologised for her family's distress and immediately removed the photograph from the platform. We also agreed not to publish the image again and to delete the digital file.

Using Facebook or any other social media platform is not of course a substitute for getting out and about and we've taken a selection of the photographs to numerous community events (including a very memorable tea dance) over the last 18 months. It has however allowed us to reach thousands of people we almost certainly could not have interacted with otherwise, including those who no longer live in Hackney. Overall, the response to the Gibson studio photographs has been overwhelmingly positive with people enjoying the photographs and the memories they evoke.

Lisa Peatfield
Project Officer, Hackney Archives





'This Vexed Question'

Installing an exhibition in a multi-use building

'This Vexed Question': 500 years of women in medicine ran at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) Museum from 19th September 2018 to 18th January 2019. It explored the stories of celebrated women medical pioneers and uncovered the extraordinary lives of previously hidden women in medicine.

Such a complex and, as evidenced by the visitor comments, sometimes contentious exhibition topic was challenging enough in itself (for a video tour of the exhibition, see the link at the end), but the rather unusual combination of the wider building being an events space and the exhibition occupying a mezzanine level in the main hall provided some fairly unique challenges.

The RCP, which celebrated its 500th birthday in September 2018, was originally the licencing body for physicians in London and, later, England and Wales, and is now a medical charity working for improvements in health and healthcare. The museum team of 4.5 people is based within the Library, Archive and Museum Services of the RCP and runs a regular public exhibition program, with topics as various as John Dee, anatomy, and modernist architecture. The building is also a popular events venue, hosting hundreds of events a year, only a handful of which involve the museum.

Exhibitions are usually installed during the quieter times of year, in January and August, when fewer clients are in the building. In 2018 however a big-budget filming project took over the entire building during August, pushing back install into the more events-heavy month of September. As a charity, the RCP uses the hire of rooms in its grade 1 listed modernist building as a key strand of its income generation. While fantastic for the RCP as a whole, it is often difficult to arrange museum work around these events, especially as the use of certain rooms blocks access to our stores and as private clients can often be very selective about what they are happy to have occurring around their event.

The largest portion of the Vexed Question install was the re-hanging of an entire wall of portraits that overlooks the exhibition space and the main hall of the RCP building. Thanks to a generous grant from the Wolfson Foundation, the hang of portraits of historic male presidents of the RCP that has been in place since the building opened in the 1960's was replaced by an entirely female hang, incorporating a new painting of out-going president Professor Dame Jane Dacre and 7 loan paintings of medical women. Being such a large wall space, the hang requires scaffolding and a team of 4 or 5 art handlers, who are contracted from an external company as the museum does not have the expertise or manpower in-house. Thankfully there were two full days available during the install period with no events occurring in the building, meaning that the art handlers were able to take down and re-hang the wall without disruption and with the necessary couriers overseeing.

On the other hand the exhibition build and the installation of the remaining paintings proved more troublesome, as any loud work such as drilling or hammering could not occur while events were happening. The exhibition area is directly in between two of the main event rooms and access to the painting store is through one of these

rooms, meaning that it is unavailable during events. As such this required some very imaginative install scheduling, and the rest of the painting install did not go quite as smoothly as the hang of the main wall.

On the morning of the first day of install, the museum team arrived at work to find the events team passing on complaints from a client whose event started later that morning. The wallpaper for the exhibition was due to be put up first thing that day – a fairly quiet activity as exhibition build activities go - and the appearance of a contractor directly outside the events room had panicked the event organiser, who was extremely worried about noise. A protracted discussion ensued, and it was eventually agreed that a screen would be erected and the work would go ahead as quietly as possible, resulting in a minor delay to the wallpaper install and increased stress levels for everyone involved.

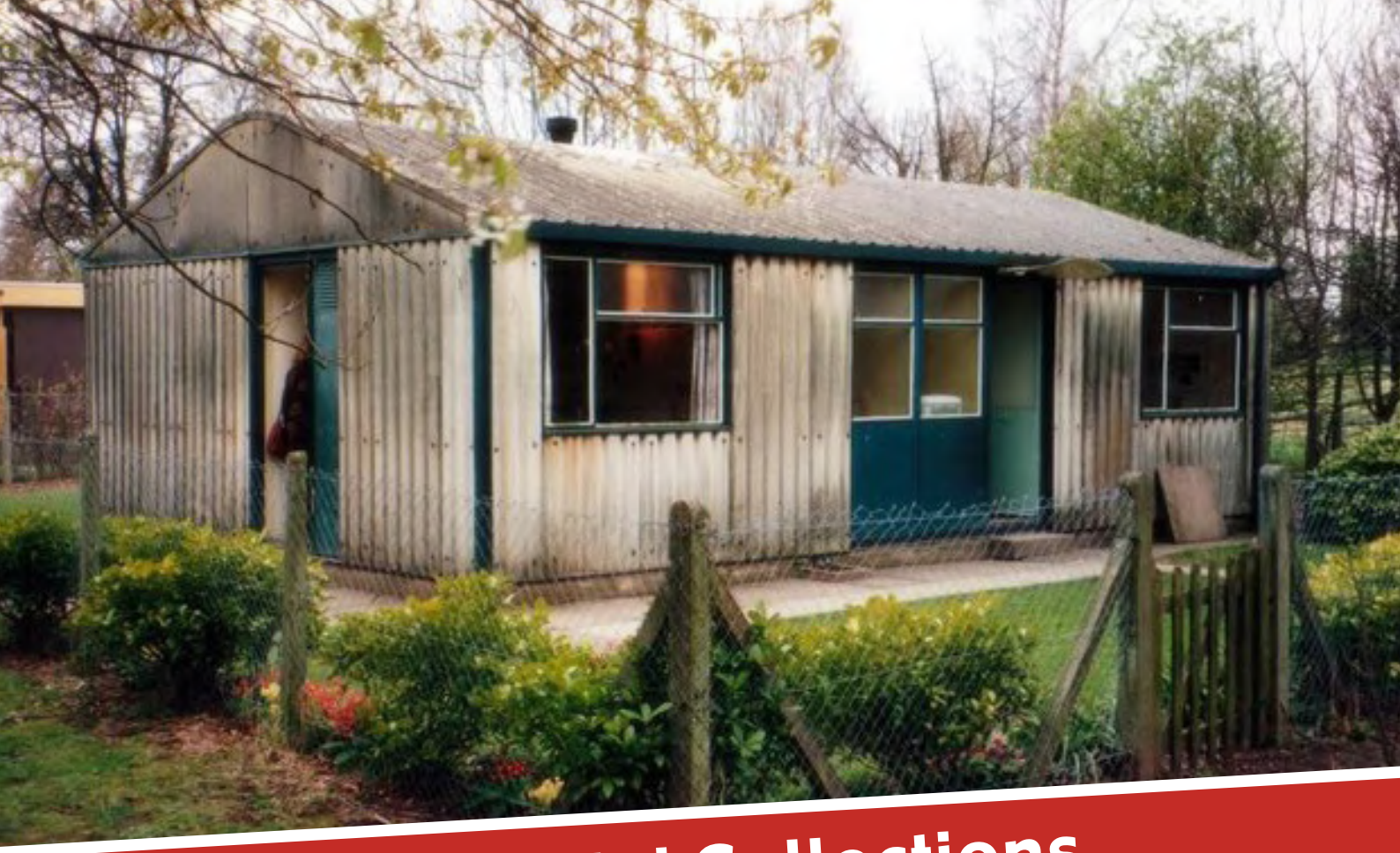
The other main difficulty was the installation of the wall panels and remaining paintings. The timing of this was limited by the availability of the external art handlers, meaning that on the day of installation there would be no access to the painting store, and no time in which the art handlers could come in to move the paintings beforehand. The solution to this required some creative use of the shared museum, archive and library store to house the paintings, blocking the librarians from their books for a day, and the museum team transporting paintings, which was the first time a number of the team had moved objects of that size. The installation was further limited by the last minute requirement from an event that loud work only be carried out in break-times, leaving an hour and 45 minutes in the day when this could happen. The museum team had an early start to bring down the paintings and mock up their positioning on the wall panels before the art handlers arrived. Usually any painting movement and measuring up is done by the art handlers, but for this the marking out of the positions was done by the museum team, who also took on some of the exhibition build tasks such as hanging the feedback wall and attaching mounts. This allowed the art handlers to make the most of the limited time in which they could be attaching painting fixings or nailing up wall panels, and resulted in a very frantic but ultimately successful day.

Unlike most exhibitions at the RCP, the nature of the subject matter and the inability of our collections alone to tell the hugely varied stories of the women in medicine meant that 'This Vexed Question' was heavily reliant on loans. Out of a total of 99 objects, 34 came from 15 other museums or private lenders, a huge task for the one, part-time exhibitions officer working on the project. This added an extra element to the install; just as events clients are at times unhappy with the other activities going on adjacent to their event, a hundred people walking into a room close to the exhibition space is likely to set any courier slightly on edge. This was managed by arranging loan installation at quieter times, when events delegates would not be moving in or out of their rooms, and by preventing access to the exhibition space during installation.

The nature of having an exhibition space in a shared-use building will always have difficulties, and although this installation proved more difficult than most, there were positives that came out of the experience. Scheduling is everything, and while it can be extremely frustrating to have a very tight schedule disrupted, flexibility from everyone involved helped; having varying team members to step in to deal with tricky discussions was also a benefit, meaning the person in charge did not have to shoulder all of the stress. Although schedules are shared ahead of time with the events team, this project showed that the museum needs to do more to ensure that there is understanding about what is involved in an installation, so Events are able to more effectively manage the expectations of their clients and to allow the museum work to happen as planned. It also showed the museum team that in practical terms, and probably to the detriment of our contractors, we can do a lot more than we previously thought, and hopefully going forward we will continue to benefit from the increased flexibility that being able to move our own paintings and install our own signage provides.

Exhibition information and video tour:
https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/event/past-exhibition-vexed-question-500-years-women-medicine

Lowri Jones
Collections Officer, Royal College of Physicians



Sacrificial Collections
Like a building to the slaughter!

What is the value of social history? Is it more or less than the value of preserving something that will never teach or inspire?

In museums, we can control the environment for an array of objects. We have climate controlled cabinets, rooms, chambers and pods. But what if an object doesn't fit into this model? Maybe it is too big, or not financially valuable enough to warrant the cost and effort of traditional museum grade storage and display. Say, a building perhaps? At Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, we have just that. Open air and lots of buildings! What do we do to conserve them and protect them from the elements? In fact, we can't. We could build airtight domes over them, or encase them in resin, but cost aside, what would be the cultural impact of this?

Currently, there is a big focus on engagement and creating connections that provide an emotional experience for visitors. These in turn see an investment of time and finances. However, this means visitors using the collection and potentially wearing them out. We could turn museums into academic-only research centres, restricting access to protect the lifespan of collections. Alternatively, do we allow museums to engage in a multi-sense environment, where part of the visitor experience taps into sharing of memories based on sensory triggers and recollections?

The Prefab from Yardley, Birmingham was moved to the museum in 1985. Built to last ten years in 1946, this Arkon IV has stood strong until now, and survived a move to its new home some twenty years ago. It has stood there, being visited by a broad range of people, all with different reasons for wanting to see inside. Made of steel, wood and asbestos, the Prefab captures some people's memories, and young minds are drawn into the history of the building because it is presented as a home.

Some visitors talk about the smell, what it reminds them of, and the memories that sense can bring - the things they remember from their youth. This is something I have witnessed: a visitor with dementia, sitting in the living room, began to share his memories of his Dad coming home at the same time every day. The visitor came into the building in a wheelchair, using a ramp that we have in place, and connected with a part of his own history in a matter of minutes, after not engaging with his group all morning.

Any other object in a collection would not have a ramp placed against it, wheels rolling through, wet shoes, dogs allowed and people sitting comfortably in it. Neither would a fire be lit, food and drinks be consumed or light

shine through unfiltered glass and open curtains. This, however, is the existence of an open-air living museum. It is a living, breathing museum that takes a visitor on a journey, not just through time, but by creating an emotional connection to a particular point in time, by understanding the social situation in which the buildings residents lived.

Would the same human connection be felt by stopping people experiencing 'living history'? The welcome from a demonstrator dressed in clothes of the time period of the building is vital and means visitors are able to interact as they undertake tasks of the time and provides a very personal way to access collections.

It was a marked transition for me from working with objects on tables in well-lit studios, to caring for buildings with no tables on or studios in which to conserve them. The practice of allowing not only demonstrators but also visitors to enjoy the buildings was a new concept, and we work within conservation guidelines to allow for this activity. During my time spent in the Prefab during a recent half term, I observed small hands opening a cupboard, whilst family members settled into the armchairs by the coal fire. Instinctively it felt like somewhere they could nest in, touch, and do what they would at a relative's house. This triggered the idea that handling objects should be placed in the sideboard, for investigation whilst parents and grandparents share their memories with each other.

Any responsible museum will follow the principles of conservation and reduce the risk of decay to any object. We can slow down the rate of deterioration by ensuring good care of things in our care. The ten agents of decay apply to any collection, but some agents pose higher threats. Having demonstrators in buildings not only adds to the visitor experience, but also increases the security of small objects. It is difficult to steal an entire building, so we leave them on view, but access to the interiors is restricted when not attended.

What do we understand the word 'museum' to mean? Do we have a variety of definitions depending on the collection or the way it is stored and displayed? Some museums have significant proportions of their collection in storage, which are never seen by anyone. Social importance and the significance of objects can be written about, and researched via digital collections and archives. Open-air museums are the collection. Without a context, how close can we get to history? How close do we need to be to connect with society in the past? With increasing value placed on accessible collections, get close enough and we might just wear it out!

Michelle Lisa Gayle
Curator, Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings

Industrial workers and local memories in the Ironbridge Gorge

In February last year, thirty-seven life-sized silhouettes of women were installed in the grounds of the Museum of Iron, part of Ironbridge Gorge Museums.

6th February 2018 of course marked 100 years since the passing of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which allowed many women to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time. To recognise this, the museum undertook census and electoral register research to gain an understanding of the women who worked in the local ceramic and iron industries of the Ironbridge Gorge, and whether or not they gained the right to vote after the Act was passed. Out of approximately 160 women who were working in these industries, only thirty-seven met the criteria enabling them to vote.

We realised that whilst knowing a little more about these women, we still had no objects to represent them. Thus the idea of using a silhouette came about. The silhouette was drawn by a member of the Curatorial team and was based on a 1918 fashion plate. The name and occupation of each woman were written on the back of each silhouette, such as Ada Burns Tile Polisher, Martha Bryan China Painter, Harriet Jones Tobacco Pipe Packer, and Mary Thompson Pipe Maker.

In reality, only 40% of women in the UK could vote in 1918, and these were mainly older, wealthier, married women. This excluded millions of ordinary working women from voting, including most women working in the Gorge's industries.

The installation proved successful and connected with many local people, some who came forward and told us they were related to the women. Each of them told us more about their relative, and sometimes gave us a photo of what they looked like. One woman even asked to have the silhouette which represented her grandmother as it meant so much to her.

Many generations of former workers of the industries continue to live in the area and the installation revealed the real want for information on local workers. For the museum, this suits us well as we are keen to capture memories from those who are connected to our industrial history. A recent lecture given at the museum focusing on the women who worked on the local mine pits also garnered much interest. Again, people came forward, telling us stories about their great grandmothers who picked and carried ironstone at pit heaps.

Much of the original research on workers in the area was conducted in the 1980s and 90s, which now leaves a large gap open for further research. It is perhaps worth noting that at the moment, the local histories we have focused on have been all about female workers. Industrial history can be male centric and this is something we are trying to redress, and it certainly seems to be connecting well with audiences.

As ever, a curator's time is increasingly stretched, and engaging with local communities is not a straightforward task. The original aim for the silhouette installation was to recognise the Act with a visual impact, whilst looking at the women who were a part of the industry and manufacture in the Gorge. We did not expect the response we received; ultimately the installation provided a platform for people to engage with and share their memories, particularly in an area of industrial history not previously regarded as important.

The silhouettes have now been taken down and we are hoping to continue to research and capture the history of former workers. This is not without its challenges. Some locals have a difficult relationship with the museum; we are based in the former workshops, offices and warehouses of the iron and ceramic industries and not everyone has fond memories of where they used to work. But it is just as important to capture that too.

Georgina Grant
Senior Curator, Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust

Victorian Painted Truncheon

Since its introduction to policing in Essex in the 1500s the truncheon has remained an essential tool. The Essex Police Museum has many in its collection, but one in particular is in excellent condition. It's not our oldest by far, but the brightly painted design makes it my personal favourite. In fact this simple piece of equipment tells the history of Essex Police.

Policing can be traced back to the Middle Ages when a nominated male supervised all the men in their village to help keep the peace. This included arresting criminals, but without ID or confirmation of authority it was often chaotic. Usually the whole village would help catch a fleeing criminal in a hue and cry. A symbol of authority and a method of protection were needed.

In the 1500s parishes could elect their own Constables. The elected Constable would carry out his duties alongside his normal 'day job' and pay was poor. They were not issued with uniforms, but it is at this point that the truncheon was introduced. Designed to be noticeable and include all the essential information they were brightly and elaborately decorated with symbols. The truncheon provided both a symbol of authority and a method of protection, and the idea caught on. However it wasn't yet adopted by all. One such example is the Watchman of the 1600s (also known as Charlies after Charles II), who patrolled the streets at night. Often elderly, ineffective and unpopular with the village, they would carry a lantern and a cutlass for protection.

In 1840 riots led Essex to form the Essex County Constabulary. There were only 100 Constables to cover the county, under the command of our longest-serving Chief Constable, Admiral McHardy. Truncheons were now standard equipment, and Constables were expected to carry them at all times whilst on duty. However, contrary to many images in cartoons and films, it was carried on the belt rather than by hand. People considered the latter too aggressive and threatening.

At the same time smaller Borough Forces existed and were separate from Essex County Constabulary. There were five in total: Harwich, Colchester, Saffron Walden, Southend and Maldon. Gradually truncheons became plainer, as the painted designs were replaced by uniforms and warrant cards. The Police Act of 1946 made police forces in towns with a population of less than 100,000 join with larger forces, and so by 1969 all five forces had combined to form the Essex and Southend-On-Sea County Constabulary. The name was later shortened to Essex Police. Truncheons were now plain wood with a turned handle and progressive changes evolved it into the black metal extendable baton used today. Despite the changes in design the truncheon is still a well-recognised symbol of the police and their authority. Although I have to say, the older painted designs remain the most popular with our visitors.

Hannah Wilson
Curator, Essex Police Museum

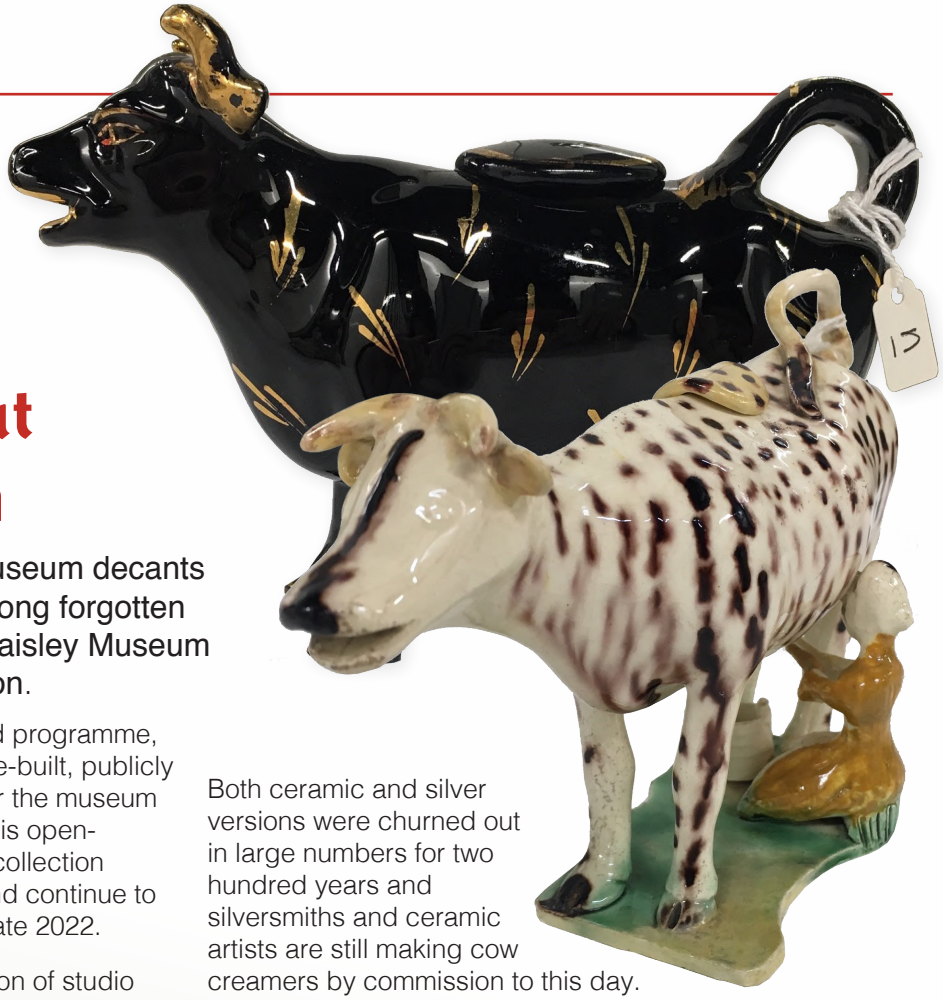
Collection of painted truncheons, dating from 1760 onwards

Victorian standard

Victorian painted truncheon

Udder Genius

Cow Creamers at Paisley Museum



Few collections move projects or museum decants pass by without the re-discovery of long forgotten unusual objects and the project at Paisley Museum & Art Galleries has been no exception.

As part of the Paisley Museum Re-imagined programme, the collection has been moved to a purpose-built, publicly accessible storage facility in preparation for the museum undergoing a large-scale refurbishment. This open-access store will enable visitors to see the collection throughout the museum's closure period and continue to be publicly accessible after re-opening in late 2022.

Paisley Museum houses the largest collection of studio ceramics in Scotland. Visitors to the new store can view locally and internationally produced pottery, including the works of prominent ceramicists such as Bernard Leach, Lucie Rie, Hans Coper and Alexander Sharp. Impressive pieces from the Wedgwood factory to the Far East are also among collection highlights of the ceramics section. The museum decant project has brought all those on board into contact with an array of fascinating objects spanning multiple collection areas, but my favourites have been a set of cow creamers. Opening a crate and being acquainted with fourteen porcelain cows, their hollowed-out bodies ready to be filled with milk and their spout-mouths agape, is the type of moment few other career paths offer. I was intrigued by these curiosities and inspired to find out more.

The concept of functional pottery jugs in the shape of a cow can be traced back to the 4th century BC and credited to the ancient Egyptians. Cow creamers reappeared in the early 18th century in Holland, where the cow was a symbol of national pride. They were first introduced to the British people in the middle of the century by John Schuppe, a Dutch immigrant to London. He crafted his creamers from silver and so initially these miniature cows were luxury items that only the richest in society could obtain, as silver production was yet to be mechanised. However, such was the demand for bovine cream jugs that pottery and porcelain varieties were created and were therefore affordable to the wider population.

Mass production of cow creamers is thought to have begun at Longton Hall in Staffordshire in the 1760s. The Pratt type model was one of the most sought-after and flourished in the late 18th and early 20th century.

Both ceramic and silver versions were churned out in large numbers for two hundred years and silversmiths and ceramic artists are still making cow creamers by commission to this day.

The fourteen cow creamers in Paisley Museum were acquired in early 2018, from the estate of a ceramics collector who lived in Glasgow. Although part of a bequest, the acquisition was unplanned but has made a very welcome addition to our collection. Paisley's cow creamers generally appear to fit with the popular Staffordshire design but show a wonderful range of styles and vary in colour and composition. The herd features a Cambrian creamer, distinguished by the cow's human-like eyes and linear application of the brown spots. One has the popularised 18th century Blue Willow pattern. There are two that have seated milkmaids by their sides, perhaps most eye-catching because the animals are twice the size they should be in proportion to their milkers! We also have a pair of twin Jackfield creamers, a Shropshire variety, notable for their shiny black glaze with gold markings.

While they once adorned Victorian tea sets, cow creamers now serve a decorative rather than practical purpose. The act of filling a cow with milk or cream and having it regurgitate the liquid was a re-enactment of the milking process, albeit an inverted one. It perhaps came to symbolise man's triumph over nature and though form now precedes function, the cow creamer continues as a novelty item irresistible to collectors.

The Paisley Museum Re-imagined project is supported with funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Scottish Government Regeneration Capital Grant Fund.

Jack Ord
Collections Assistant, Paisley Museum & Art Galleries

Can Social History Collections Be Decolonised?

Seminar report

‘Decolonisation’ is becoming a familiar term, but how many of us really understand the theories and practices involved? This seminar was a very useful introduction to the essential concepts, which left me feeling empowered to start rethinking my own professional approach.

Introducing what decolonisation can mean, Thembi Mutch suggested looking at gaps and invisibilities in historical narratives, and acknowledging our own ignorance. Decolonising involves ceding intellectual control.

Toyin Agbetu talked about how we can facilitate difficult conversations within and beyond our institutions. Museums can be a safe space for opposing groups to meet, but for the discussions to be useful we must go beyond our comfort zones. We may find it difficult as curators to relinquish our attachment to a neutral voice, but decolonising means acknowledging that objects and the narratives around them are inherently political. The attempt to decolonise is not an attack on our professionalism, but is about enriching the accuracy of our interpretation by bringing the voices of experience into the conversation.

A recurring theme was the need to address the lack of diversity in our knowledge base. Ollie Douglas noted that representing or describing diversity does not in itself address inequality. Thanh Sinden discussed the fact that diversity and inclusion work does not tackle imbalances of power; to achieve that we must rethink the systems governing who holds the power. As Sara Wajid observed, museums are intrinsically a colonial technology; they were established as part of the machinery of empire to enact the colonial system of classification.

When considering participatory practice or co-production, we need to be mindful that it may be difficult or onerous for people to share their stories. It is especially important to ensure that their contributions are recorded in an accessible way, so that we do not make the same requests repeatedly. If people can see a public, socially useful purpose for the museum then they are less likely to feel exploited in being asked to give their time.

Several of the presenters pointed out the need to acknowledge past interpretations of material, however embarrassed we may feel. Decolonising means exposing how museum discourses have operated in the past. A failure to acknowledge these narratives means they cannot be refuted and may risk being revived.

The day offered lots of practical examples to follow. Thanh Sinden suggested that discussions of migrant communities should look at why they migrated, addressing push factors, inequalities and legacies of empire. By bridging gaps of understanding between different groups, social history collecting and display can help to achieve social justice. For example, the Museum of English Rural Life is acknowledging the impact of British sheep farming practices on New Zealand landscapes and Maori culture. I was also lucky enough to join Subhadra Das’s walking tour of her campus-wide exhibition ‘Bricks and Mortals’, exposing UCL’s central place in the history of eugenics.

Finally, Sara Wajid reminded us that decolonising is an emerging practice. As we engage in this work, we are all making mistakes, and we can learn from one another’s failures.

Lily Crowther
Curator (Human History), Warwick District Council

Musical Instruments Unwrapped

Telling Social Histories through Musical Instruments - 12th November 2018

Seminar report

More than forty members of the Social History Curators' Group (SHCG) and the Musical Instruments Resource Network (MIRN) gathered at the heart of Edinburgh's Cowgate on the 12th November 2019 to attend a joint seminar of the SHCG and MIRN.

Hosted by Scotland's oldest purpose-built concert hall, St Cecilia's Hall, Concert Room and Music Museum, the meeting featured a program with broad perspectives on how to tell social histories through musical instruments.

During the day-long seminar, a wide range of speakers provided insights into the functions and uses of musical instruments in collections nowadays. Developing new activities in museums, the role of instruments in wartime, gender studies, involvement of new technologies, are only some examples of topics debated during such a stimulating and enjoyable day.

After a pleasant networking breakfast, the meeting began with a warm welcome from Mimi S Waitzman, MIRN's chair, and from Holly Trubshawe, SHCG Trustee and Seminar Organiser.

Thereafter, the first paper session started with the fascinating Keynote speech given by Gabriele Rossi Rognoni, from Royal College of Music Museum in London, who discussed the importance of preserving and presenting functionality of music-related objects in instrument museums, often considered as mausoleums, places where the musically dead are displayed.

The first session proceeded to the topic of inspiration and aspiration inside museums with the presentation of Tim Corum and Margaret Birley, from the Hornimam Museum and Gardens in London. They discussed the challenging developments at the museum to engage people with the collection. Alice Little moved further with her illustration of the research launched at the Bate Collection in Oxford into the archive left by its first curator Antony Baines, and Holly Trubshawe, from

the Kingsbridge Cookworthy Museum in Devon, highlighted the value of associated material in relation to musical instruments through the mystery surrounding Mr Squire's missing "Stradivarius" cello.

The day continued with three stimulating papers on historical networks behind musical instruments. Simon Waters from the Queen's University in Belfast explored the Londoner woodwind design between 1760 and 1840; the flute player Ashley Salomon showed the extraordinary porcelain 'Royal flute'; and Arnold Myers from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow investigated the Salvation Army as brass instrument makers.

After attendees stocked up on a refined packed lunch, coffee and conversation during the break, the following session discussed exhibiting sound in museums using acoustic and digital media: Gustav Holst's piano was presented by Laura Kinnear, curator of the Holst Birthplace Museum in Cheltenham; concertinas and mouth organs from the Great War by the concertina maker William Quale; and, lastly, digital sample libraries of historical instruments' sounds by Martin Perkins, the instrument curator at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

The conference ended with the final two presentations focusing on representation and inclusion. Verena Barth, from the Norwegian Ringve Music Museum in Trondheim, looked at the trumpet as a stereotyped male instrument and, finally, Joe Sullivan illustrated brilliant projects at the RAF Museum in London, aiming to become an active community hub for local residents.

Museum and heritage professionals are seeking new approaches to interpret and exhibit musical instruments in a more inclusive way, to efficiently respond museum visitors' expectations. This joint seminar of SHCG and MIRN represents a meaningful example of a new perspective: showing musical instruments in a broad context, as historical and cultural objects with a significant role in society.

Arianna Rigamonti
University of Pavia

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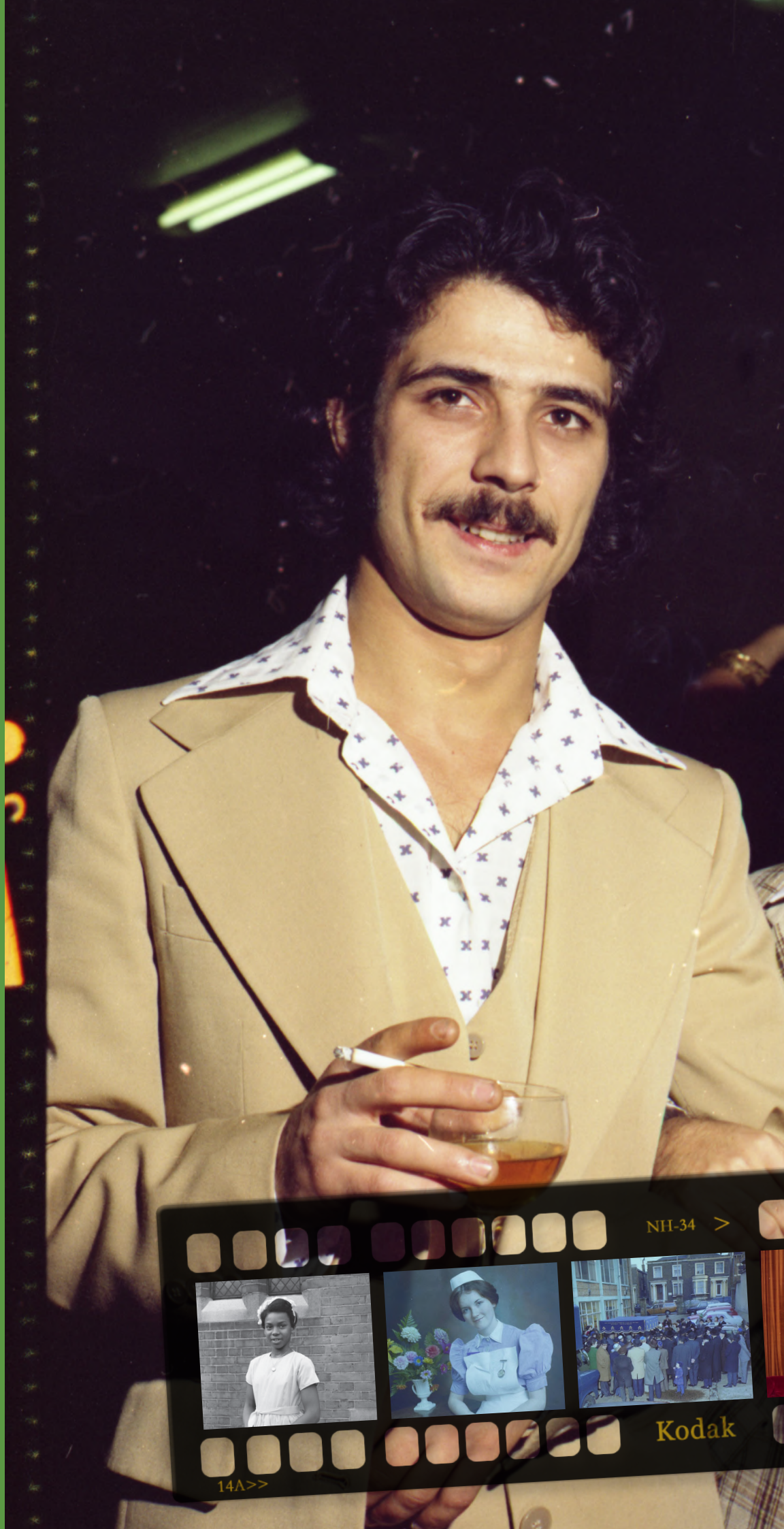

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