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ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

THANK YOU DEAR
STEPHEN HAWKING

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In a world of ever-growing specialisation, national museums can seem confused and contradictory. Museums do more than one thing. They’re simultaneously complex public institutions, tourist attractions, and engines of scholarship.

The core aim of our new research strategy is to ensure that research at the Science Museum Group (SMG) operates as a tool of integration. It marks an effort to amplify the effects of all the things we do from curating and conservation to publishing, teaching and collaborations with academia, the arts and business.

Historically, museum research and scholarship had a disciplining quality, bringing coherence to aristocratic collections and private cabinets of curiosity. But this is also a relatively short history, and while many of the core functions of museum research remain unchanged – to bring order, confer prestige, and facilitate public understanding – what is understood by those terms has altered considerably.

One new role for research is as a broker of new social understandings. With assistance from the British Council we hosted a number of sharing sessions with curators from the Museum of National Awakening in Indonesia. Wellcome funding enabled the employment of an African Research Curator able to help us uncover and articulate potential new approaches to a neglected collection. Research cannot just be about caring for the collection, developing greater understanding of the objects, or building greater mastery of a wider range of techniques of display or interpretation.

We want to move away from the assumption that research only matters if it’s facilitating ‘delivery’: we want to resist the idea that research must be immediately and visibly productive.

Instead, we argue that the job of a research department is to enable the museum to block out day-to-day noise and focus on long-term strategic challenges. For illustrative example, our Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration (MaiHOC) project has brought together museums and universities from across Western Europe along with ethicists, the University of London Press and the thinktank Demos with the aim of examining the impacts of industrial patronage on museums of science and industry.

We believe research has an important role to play in building institutional self-understanding. This can be as simple as protecting individual time for pointed professional reflection. More expansively, we want to encourage an approach to research that motivates people to examine what they do, how they do it, and why.

There is a bigger vision thing here. It’s been said we live in an era of information abundance but are plagued by a poverty of understanding. We live in a complex world which, although it is often described as becoming ever more interconnected, also seems fractured by increasing specialisation. As Patrick Collison and Michael Nielsen have persuasively argued, one result of this is that the research sector is becoming more inefficient. It takes more and more resource to discover less and less.

Our new research strategy works from the starting point that museum collections – as overwhelming, pervasive and bewildering as they can be – are helpful in countering this malignant trend because they help identify gaps in our thinking. They provide both a platform and a range of social and cultural opportunities for new knowledge to be created. It’s both an opportunity to be grasped and a difficulty to be overcome that museum research is not – and cannot – simply follow the prevailing norms of academia.

A unique workshop at the National Collections Centre provided a striking example of this. In September, a team of British Sign Language (BSL) experts met with leading scientists to work with SMG’s repository of scientific objects. Together participants workshoped new signs, boiling down concepts for clarity and specificity, while remaining faithful to the science. The workshop demonstrated how historic objects can inform the visual dissemination of contemporary scientific concepts.

It’s an example that illustrates a collective need to put materiality back into our understandings of the world. Even in the history of science, rich understandings of objects, materials and experimental practices can be surprisingly thin on the ground.

In her work on Georg Simon Ohm, Charlotte Connelly has made the broader point that research methodologies should expand to encompass past – perhaps failed – experiments. The bigger argument is that scientific instruments need to be understood as entangled with the cognitive processes of the researchers: that physical interactions between the researchers, their scientific apparatus, and the phenomena they produce leads to the iterative reconfiguration and redesigning of both the apparatus itself and the insights it produces. They enable us to know how we got from there to here.

We often see it repeated across the news media that there is a collapse in the trust of institutions. Whether this is overstated or not, building shared understandings of how we know what we know provides an opportunity for new research practices to grow public confidence in our institutions.

The collections of the Science Museum Group are well placed to do this work: not only recovering the histories and networks of scientific ideas, but reconstructing ways of thinking.
An inherent disruptiveness is built into research that works through material culture.

Connolly has argued that we can and should encourage researchers to augment lists of things to read with a list of objects or procedures to try. It is a simple idea but one that has application and immediate relevance far outside of the world of the museum or scientific research – from fashion to gardening to the veracity of the news media, our conviction is that researchers (from policy makers to school children) would benefit from working with objects as well as texts.

We might also take note of the wider principle. Researching out from collections entails the creative juxtaposition of artefacts, works and specimens in ways that often unsettle today’s received wisdom, offering ways of being, doing and thinking that bring forth glimpses of alternative worlds.

The anthropologist Nicholas Thomas characterised museum collections as a landscape. Researchers who dig into them not only uncover objects but a whole chain of historical relationships between objects, curators, collectors and creators: the effects and evidence of a range of intentions, dreams and desires. As projects like our own Congruence Engine illustrate, the new materiality of the digital world augments this complex landscape still further.

Because the national collections are eclectic, they tend to resist comfortable frames and confound preformulated theories. An inherent disruptiveness is built into research that works through material culture.

Recent studies of expertise bear out the utility of such heterodox approaches. High-level performance apparently depends on how you learn as much as what you learn. Being able to get to the heart of a problem by identifying, highlighting and demonstrating what is going wrong demands the development of a range of skills, knowledge and techniques that cut across existing hierarchies and specialisms.

But because of the work of researchers such as Roger Kneebone our understanding of expertise has shifted to become the story of studies not masterpieces. Endless practice rather than notable performances. A record of the hours of dedicated work it takes to demonstrate knowledge and skill at an extremely high-level with little apparent effort. Expertise is now seen as a process.

We think that SMG can and should play a central role in encouraging the development of such processes, and that our new strategy must foster a culture of research excellence that is able to do it.

We want to facilitate a wider culture where object lists become as important as reading lists. Where museum collections are valued for the ways in which they encourage researchers to experiment with cross-disciplinary solutions that cut across existing domains of knowledge. Where our collections are valued not just as the home of amazing sources, but as laboratories of method. An era of museum research which is rewarding, enriching and fun.
The Science Museum’s ambitious programme of new galleries and exhibitions continues to be underpinned by rigorous and imaginative research. This is clearly expressed through our newest contemporary science exhibition, *Injecting Hope: The race for a Covid-19 vaccine*. This exhibition was the result of an international collaboration with the National Council of Science Museums, India, and the Guangdong Science Center in China. It tells the story of the worldwide effort to develop vaccines at pandemic speed, and draws on the remarkable work of Science Museum curators, led by Keeper of Medicine Natasha McEnroe, to identify, collect, research and document over 1,000 objects relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. This collecting project was not only ambitious in terms of speed and scale, but also in terms of storytelling. This collecting project has been focused on the emotional impact of isolation and loneliness. To address this, we have worked closely with researchers at the Event Horizon Telescope to tell the story of capturing images of black holes. Through building strong connections with individuals in a huge global network, we have been able to identify a box used to ship data from a telescope in Hawaii to Boston, where the black hole image was pieced together.

The Science Museum Group’s (SMG) Covid-19 Collecting Project is the largest contemporary science collecting project we have ever undertaken. Involving close working between all SMG museums, we aimed to provide a permanent record of medical, scientific, industrial, cultural and personal responses to the pandemic and chronicle its impact on society. The project consulted with other organisations to agree an ethical framework for our work. A formal Advisory Panel was established, involving scientists, academics and other experts. Curators have since disseminated their methods and reflections on this project through workshops and presentations, including at the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health conference at the University of Oslo. This collecting project was not only ambitious in terms of speed and scale, but also in terms of story-telling. Curators were determined to represent the emotional impact of isolation and loneliness. To address this, we collaborated with the University of Sheffield who were conducting their own study into the student experience during the pandemic. Natasha McEnroe worked with Richard Phillips, Professor of Geography at Sheffield, to develop a methodology for students to record their experiences of the pandemic, including through physical objects, interviews and hand-written testimoines. The notebooks describing the objects and recording students’ conversations are a rich resource to be unlocked by future researchers and we hope they will use this archive to ask new questions about the lasting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the generation who were still young when it hit.

While we do not expect to undertake anything on the scale of the Covid-19 Collecting Project any time soon, contemporary collecting at the Science Museum is a major focus and exemplifies the fruitful and dynamic relationship between curators, academics and researchers. Contemporary Science Curators have been working closely with researchers at the Event Horizon Telescope to tell the story of capturing images of black holes. Through building strong connections with individuals in a huge global network, we have been able to identify a box used to ship data from a telescope in Hawaii to Boston, where the black hole image was pieced together. It takes patient and persistent research to track down the material culture that will help tell these stories for future museum visitors and researchers.

Much of the time, curators are scanning the horizon for possible acquisitions, or trends in science and society that should be represented through our collections. However, work to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the objects already in our collection is equally critical. Over the last year, much of this work has been focused on the objects not currently on public display. A team of curators, working closely with colleagues in Documentation and Conservation, have been using their research and detective skills to identify objects and gain the insight we need to move them safely from Blythe House to their new home at the National Collections Centre in Wiltshire. In 2022, curators at Blythe House were enlisted to provide thorough research into a set of over 100 objects containing unidentified hazardous substances. Their research avenues included safe physical inspection of objects, archival research, broader historic research into chemicals typically used in relevant areas, such as dye production and medical laboratory experiments, and sometimes contacting existing producers for technical information, such as ingredient listings. This painstaking work may not be at the glamorous end of curatorial practice, but it contributes significantly to making our collection more accessible for all.

This year at the National Collections Centre has been one of considerable change. There is palpable excitement every time a new group of curators enters our vast new collection management facility to see yet more objects moved in from Blythe House, or elsewhere on site. We have seen some of the largest objects begin to take their places on the freestanding floor grid, including a Rhodesian Rail carriage. William Sims, Curator Team Leader, and William Law, PhD candidate at the National Railway Museum, have conducted in-depth research into this object, which will soon be viewable to the public for the first time in over thirty years. Their research has revealed that the information the National Railway Museum currently holds on the object is dominated by its association with artist David Shepherd and its journey back from Africa in the 1970s. We currently hold very little information about how the carriage was used in then-Rhodesia, and even less is known about the staff who worked with it and the passengers who rode on it.

Research is on-going, and it has been a remarkable example of how a single object can hold so many new and untold stories. The enhanced in-person access we will provide at the National Collections Centre from 2024 goes hand-in-hand with our growing online collection and digital access. Working with curators across the Science Museum, the Collection Access team has begun to answer hundreds of email enquiries every month about items in our collection. Each one represents a different point on a researcher’s journey, and it is a thrill to know that an object in our care may provide a missing piece of the puzzle, or spark a whole new line of inquiry. This is the joy of working with collections: there will always be more questions to ask.
Across the National Science and Media Museum (NSMM), this year our ambitions to transform the museum stepped up a gear. Every single team has been involved in planning for our new Sound and Vision galleries, and the associated major works. In addition to public-facing developments, the wider project includes installing a new conservation lab at the museum, offering not only a much-needed facility for colleagues, but also the exciting possibility of future research opportunities that are currently not practicable. In June the museum temporarily closed to enable public access to our Insight research centre. The museum and Insight are expected to reopen in summer 2024.

Underpinning the development of our new galleries is an enormous body of research, whether close study of collections, explorations of new ways to work with our communities, or consultative work with our audiences. The findings of these strands of research will be woven throughout our new displays when they open to the public in 2025.

Beyond our transformation project, two Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research projects concluded this year at the museum. Objects of the Mind saw Principal Investigator Dr Tim Snelson of the University of East Anglia work with NSMM curators Toni Booth and Dr Annie Jamieson to explore the interactions between objects, films and mental health. This project explored the value of films and other forms of popular culture to recontextualise and bring together museum objects and film was explored.

Anne was also Co-Investigator on an AHRC funded Research Network, Original Cast Recordings: Musical Theatre and/as Sonic Heritage. Together with Principal Investigator Dr Ben Macpherson of the University of Portsmouth, Annie has delivered a series of events bringing together researchers with an interest in the technologies of recording musical theatre. During the development of their network they have explored topics including the taxonomies and status of original cast recordings, and the cultures of listeners to these types of material.

A further AHRC funded project will conclude in the coming year. Communities and Crowds explores new methodologies for community engagement with photographic collections at NSMM. The project is led by Dr Geoff Belknap, now at National Museums Scotland having departed his role at NSMM in August 2022. Research Associate Dr Alexandra Fitzpatrick led the NSMM elements of the project over the last year. Working closely with a group of volunteers to select a suite of 410 images from the Daily Herald collection of photographs, the volunteers chose to focus on images relating to Windrush; their selections were uploaded to citizen science platform Zooniverse where online volunteers were invited to transcribe text from the front and reverse of the photographs, tag the records with geographical information and chat with other participants online. Remarkably, the entire collection was transcribed within a week, with 221 volunteers collaborating on the project from around the world. In a hybrid workshop wrapping up this phase of the project, volunteers joined the project’s research team to discuss their work and findings.

The next phase of work will see rich information gathered from Zooniverse back into the museum’s collections documentation so that it can inform future curatorial work and be made widely accessible to SMG’s visitors and audiences. The team will also continue work on a toolkit which will support other institutions with photographic collections to undertake similar work. This will be further developed and widely disseminated as a project output.

The museum was joined by a new PhD student this year. Solvig Choi is funded via the Science Museums and Archives consortium for her project, Inside-Out and Outside-In: Participatory Methods for Science and Technology Collections with the University of Leeds. She joins three further students working closely with the museum. Jayne Knight is coming to the end of her doctoral research, which takes a close look at the Kodak collection at NSMM; Francesca Strobino is also approaching submission of her thesis, which investigates Henry Fox Talbot’s experiments in photomechanical printing; and Cathy Lucas has completed her second year and is now doing the final year of her degree.

Within the curatorial team, two curators have been awarded doctorates this year. Dr Ruth Quinn, Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology, researched historical geographies of landscape significance at Saltaire World Heritage Site, and was awarded her degree by the University of Hull.
“The findings of these strands of research will be woven throughout our new displays when they open to the public in 2025”

Dr Charlotte Connelly, Head Curator, investigated the history of Ohm’s law, taking a close look at the historical apparatus and the experimental practice of German natural philosopher Georg Simon Ohm. She was awarded her degree by the University of Cambridge. Next year will be characterised by a close focus on the museum itself as we work intensively on the transformation of the museum and the development of the Sound and Vision galleries. Although we cannot currently welcome researchers to our Insight research centre, collections access will be facilitated remotely and we encourage enquiries. We are looking forward to reopening our research centre in summer 2024 and welcoming in-person research visits to the collection again.
The last year has been one of change at the NRM, not least when it comes to research. Teams have changed, research focuses have expanded, and new projects have launched that continue to expand the boundaries of not just what we research but how and why we do so.

Perhaps the most significant change has been the dual departure of Senior Curator Ed Bartholomew and, at the same time, Research Associate Dr Sophie Vohra. Ed was with the museum for 27 years, a wealth of expertise and a consistent source of advice and support for the research community at NRM. May 2023 marked his retirement, capping a career that spanned innumerable projects, exhibitions and workshops. Both his support and his deep knowledge of the collections will be missed. At the same time, Dr Sophie Vohra left us at the end of her contract. A former CDP student and a tireless champion of both PhD students and student placements more generally, Sophie’s passion for challenging and disruptive research will likewise be very sorely missed! Currently taking up a post-doctoral position at the University of Leicester, she remains in the field of museum research, studying the experiences of disabled and neurodiverse visitors.

This period also marked two new arrivals, though, in the form of CDP students. Peter Randall, working with the University of York, will explore the history and archaeology of the navvies, that shifting population of workers who built the early railways. Tracing their communities and their depictions in the national press at the time, Peter’s work addresses a surprising scholarly gap in the field. On the other end of the railway age, Laura Littlefair is working with Northumbria University to look at the recent history of Shildon. One of the first railway towns, the site of Timothy Hackworth’s early workshop, Shildon is often looked at as a story of 19th and early 20th-century industrial boom. Yet the closure of the British Rail carriage works in the 1990s brought about a sharp contraction, throwing a town that had only ever existed around the railways into uncertainty.
“Research has spanned four continents, two hundred years, and technologies ranging from steam-powered sugar cane beaters through to massive steam ships.”

Laura picks up this story here, examining the legacy of the works closure and the eventual opening of our Locomotion museum on site. Both are welcome additions to our small but very active PhD student community.

New projects have been a major theme of the research year at NRM this time around! The launch of the HS2 Contemporary Collecting project saw Alison Kay, Rob Scargill and Oli Betts work together to explore the sensitive topic of support for, and opposition to, this major new rail expansion. The justification was very much rooted in historical research – namely the lack of archival evidence of those 19th century opponents to railway growth – which reassure those anxious about such a live issue. The work has begun identifying potential archives and objects for acquisition, including everything from awards given to trees that were ultimately uprooted during construction to models of huge tunnel boring machines.

2023 has also seen the launch of People, Pride and Progress, headed by Ashlynn Welburn – an oral history collecting project focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ former staff on Britain’s railways. This has received a very warm reception from industry partners, with many staff organisations agreeing to provide support or advice, and is due to start collecting material over the next few months.

Finally, the Slavery and Steam Research Network, encompassing researchers from NRM, SIM, Leeds Industrial Museums, the Borthwick Archives, and the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York, has been meeting throughout the last year. Research has spanned four continents, two hundred years, and technologies ranging from steam-powered sugar cane beaters through to massive steam ships. As with so much research, we have barely scratched the surface of this complicated and emotive topic, but there are plans to develop this into something much more substantive further in the coming months.

Throughout all of this, teaching and research support has continued as usual. A big step forward has been the recent move to four-day opening in Search Engine. Staff, students and the public continue to make use of the resources in our archives and collection.

Over the past year we have supported students from the Universities of York, Huddersfield, Sheffield and even Macquarie in Australia, and teaching seminars have drawn students from topics as diverse as Archaeology, Design, and English Literature. The dedicated space that Search Engine offers for hands-on teaching with collections objects is vital to research at the museum, and the Search Engine staff and volunteers support student visits year-round.

Our collection continues to inspire new research. Recently our PhD student Will Law, based at the University of Southampton, has been exploring the history of our Rhodesian Railways carriage alongside NCC colleague Will Sims. Built in Britain, this carriage operated on railways across southern Africa, particularly the contentious territory of Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe) and the two Wills have been considering how best to present this complex, colonial history to the public. We have been joined by White Rose funded placement students Dr Johnathan King and Eleanor Bailey to explore our photographic archive and protest material collections respectively.

Elsewhere in this report, my colleague Tania Parker discusses her amazing work cataloguing the Railways Archive – one of many early steps towards the looming bi-centenary of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 2025 that will no doubt form the core of research reports to come!
RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

LAUREN RYALL-WAITE
Head Curator, Science and Industry Museum

OVERVIEW

Transformation of our site is progressing at the Science and Industry Museum (SIM) as we continue to decarbonise alongside developing gallery content for our audiences. Research remains key to our activity, especially work that furthers understanding of the collections and our site history, which is tied into all our work towards our 2030 Masterplan vision. The museum is home to the terminus of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, the first inter-urban passenger railway which celebrates its 200th anniversary in 2023. As we advance to this milestone, our research activity drives new understanding of Manchester’s rail heritage and its global connections, and how it furthered the complex relationship between the city and cotton across the world.

INCLUSIVE NARRATIVES

There continues to be a strong focus on research and development into inclusive narratives in the museum collections, particularly in our textile collections which are inherently linked with exploitation of enslaved people. In June, Senior Curator of Industrial Heritage Katherine Vidal Belshaw spoke at UCL’s Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, during their Empty Plinths conference. Katherine described SIM’s work in exploring the connections between our collections and slavery and presented our perspective on the role that museums of industry and enslavement can play.

In June, Katherine is also presenting research on a Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund (delivered by the Museums Association) and Arts Council England funded project, with the museum in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University. The research is exploring the post-Apartheid connections between our collections and slavery and will be in gallery development as well as in the wider museum sector to discuss how it changes our approach to material culture with complex histories.

COLLABORATIVE DOCTORAL AWARD STUDENTS

Bethany Turner-Pemberton has been developing her thesis ‘Technically Fabric: Innovation in textile design and practice in 20th–21st century Greater Manchester with the museum and Manchester Metropolitan University. During early 2023, alongside dedicated archival research with the Shirley Institute archival material at SIM, Bethany undertook a part-time placement within the curatorial team at the museum. The placement was structured in two strands, the first to develop an exhibition proposal exploring contemporary textile manufacture through both traditional means of production and innovative new applications. The second strand focused on contemporary collecting delivered through a series of workshops with the curatorial staff, culminating in a contemporary collecting report. Bethany’s recent focus has been interviewing textile manufacturers and producers across Greater Manchester, gathering data and analysing this information to identify resilient practice within the industry. The research coming out of this thesis is already impacting museum practice, and themes within the thesis are adding to knowledge about 20th and 21st century textile practice in Greater Manchester.

Bethany has supported the annual Postgraduate Research Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University in March 2023, and given papers at the Women + Archives at Stockport Hat Works (‘Rummaging and Responding: Contemporary Perspectives in Archives’) and at the NWCDTP Work in Progress conference at Lancaster Castle (‘Bridging the Gap: A Reflective Work-in-Progress Discussion on the Experience of ARCH Collaborative Doctoral Award Research’) in collaboration with Emily Beswick in June 2023. Bethany has an upcoming paper in TEXTILE: Journal of Cloth and Culture (‘Out of Place: Cross-Cultural Collaboration and Virtual Space’), co-authored with Kate Egan and Gemma Potter.

Alexander Appleton has continued to work on his thesis, Manchester Goods, Trading a Global Commodity, centring his research into the archival materials of the firm Langworthy Brothers and Co. Alexander has revealed important narratives about the interplay between Manchester’s textile exports to Brazil and other South American countries and the slave economies that were located there. Alexander is also exploring the importance of merchant banks and the Liverpool shipping networks and how this played with the supply chain which was integral to Manchester cotton trade in overseas markets.

Alexander has also been on a placement with the Congruence Engine project, creating a glossary of terms and taxonomies relating to the West Riding Wooll Trade along with a spreadsheet of all the textile pattern books that are stored in UK archives in the North West of England.

Alexander produced a blog on the museum website to share his research into Langworthy Brothers and Co in July 2023.

RESEARCH CONFERENCE

SIM hosted the 2022 Science Museum Group (SMG) research conference, ‘Historical Threads: New Perspectives on Textile History and Material Culture’. The conference was themed around Manchester and textiles heritage; its material legacy encompassing not just the fabric itself but machinery, dyes and pattern books, mills and warehouses. The papers discussed the complicated legacy cotton left behind, including trade, fashion and innovation, and also exploitation, energy, the environment, globalisation and the pressing question of how we talk about this history now. This conference was an opportunity for SIM to broker wide-ranging conversations about how museums and archive collections and research can intersect with current scholarly debates. In association with the Science Museum Group Journal, a keynote address was given by Professor Prasannan Parthasarathi and focused on ‘The Indian Challenge and the Rise of Manchester’.

The conference brought together academics and curators dealing with a global legacy of textile heritage and gave the opportunity to discuss the impact this complex history still has today, in both a local and worldwide context.

THE FUTURE

As SIM continues to understand and share the heritage of the Industrial Revolution and beyond in Manchester, research remains inherently linked with collections knowledge. Looking forward to 2024 we will share more of the complex histories being uncovered through research into industrial textile collections, and progress the global perspective of the material culture we care for.
LEARNING AND AUDIENCE RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

KAREN DAVIES
Head of Learning Research and Resources, Science Museum

RABEA SCHWARZMANN
Audience Research Manager, Science Museum

The Science Museum Group’s (SMG) Learning Research and Resources department continues to be involved in several learning research projects across the Group and externally. This research directly influences practice and impacts the work SMG and affiliates do with audiences.

INCLUSIVE DIGITAL MUSEUM INNOVATION PROJECT

From February 2022 to July 2023, a cross-disciplinary network of colleagues in the UK and the Republic of Korea came together to explore inclusive approaches to the digital transformation of arts and heritage organisations. Funded by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the project drew on the partner countries’ knowledge and expertise in both digital innovation and the arts, culture and heritage sector to broadly explore digital inequality and inclusion.

The main objective of this project was to bring together the Republic of Korea’s advancements in digital technology and gaming and the UK’s socially engaged museum practices. In doing so, the project aimed to explore inclusive and ethical approaches to digital practice in arts and heritage organisations. Key activities included a series of three online workshops and a two-day conference held in London in July 2023, attended by researchers and museum practitioners from the UCL Institute of Archaeology (IoA) and the Games and Life Lab at KAIST Graduate School of Culture Technology (GSCT) as well as several library and museum partners, including the SMG. The workshops featured contributions from SMG colleagues, who presented case studies on Wonderlab+ and Open for All as well as the Yorkshire Game Festival.

The manifesto for digital inclusion in museums and heritage to which project participants contributed during the 2023 Digital Inclusion conference in London. The manifesto affirms our sector’s commitment to working towards inclusivity in digital experiences. In line with SMG’s Open for All Strategy and Equity Framework, the manifesto suggests that a broad range of abilities and needs must be considered when designing digital experiences. Whilst acknowledging that digital technology comes with its own unique set of challenges for museums (including data protection and safeguarding considerations), project partners agreed that museums can also harness the power of digital to improve accessibility for previously excluded groups. Museum practitioners, the manifesto states, have an important role to play in promoting inclusion, for instance by ensuring that digital projects are co-created, people-centred and values-led.

EARLY YEARS AND LEARNING PROJECT PHASE 2

The Early Years Learning project, funded by the Helen Hamlyn Trust, started its second phase in January 2023, with an end date of August 2025. Phase 1 of the project considered how children aged 4–7 years engage with museum objects related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at the Science Museum. Phase 1 also tested 18 innovative prototypes to enhance young children’s engagement with such museum objects. Findings from Phase 1 show that the prototypes made young children’s experiences in object-rich galleries more interactive and joyful.
“The manifesto affirms our sector’s commitment to working towards inclusivity in digital experiences.”
In a busy year for the Journal we produced both a super-sized special issue focused on the work of the Congruence Engine project (see page 27 for more on the project’s progress) and an open issue showcasing the richness of the pie into which the Journal dips its fingers.

Ever interested in developing into new areas, this year we introduced an international Journal keynote lecture series to headline our annual research conference and have been experimenting with new forms of visual essay.

The Autumn ’22 issue (no. 18) was always planned as a special issue for Congruence Engine as it followed the conference at the end of the project’s first year. So, the Journal’s editorial team were able to start many months in advance working on the issue structure with Tim Boon (the Congruence Engine lead) and building relationships with the many distributed researchers involved. We knew the issue would be a challenge, not just because of its size (we would end up producing 18 articles rather than our usual 9 or 10 in a compressed production schedule) but also because the issue needed to reflect the experimental way in which the project was developing and the innovative digital media it was working with.

The project approach was to develop organically based on principles of ‘action research’, which meant that articles (and production timetables) had to reflect work still in process. As Helen Graham and Arran Rees mention in their ‘emergent editorial’, the special issue also needed to have this flexible, co-constructed quality. As a result, we developed responsive ways to adapt production schedules and peer review processes and expectations.

The project nature affected the special issue in other ways too. At its essence Congruence Engine is about bringing together collections and knowledge that has been distributed geographically, institutionally, or by culture and convention, and this gave us licence to encourage experimental forms of collaborative article. Authors wrote by interviewing researchers from related disciplines (John Agar), by jointly responding to key words within their area of research (Stefania Zardini Lacedelli and Arran J Rees) through joint conversations to distil ideas about community participation (Simon Papple, Stefania Zardini Lacedelli, Arran J Rees, Stuart Prior and Maggie Smith) or, as curators, by reviewing the histories of their collections alongside those of similar institutions (Kylea Little, Felicity McWilliams and Ellie Swinbank).

For me, this bringing together of diverse voices is one of the strengths of this issue, and the authors too found the process fascinating.

Other new (for us) topics which the special issue brought to the Journal included digital humanities research (Jane Winters and Anna-Maria Sichani, Daniel Wilson) and an insight into the experimental approaches to Machine Learning that the project is exploring. As well as a digital manifesto for the project (Alex Butterworth), articles included a discussion of the state of Machine Learning within the museum field (John Stack and Jamie Unwin) and a survey of emerging Deep Learning techniques in the wider field (such as Deep Layout Parsing or Large Language Models) that could be harnessed to create a national collection (Asa Carlow).
In the Spring 23 issue (no. 19) you get a sense of the range of articles the Journal finds a home for. Some certainly are based on our own collections and research, but others contribute to science museum theory and practice from the wider academic field. Two articles focus very closely on extraordinary objects in our collections: a re-evaluation of an important electronic synthesizer with a focus on its role in live performance (Frances Morgan) and a discussion of how an Indigenous Australian shield came to be categorised as part of a fire-making collection (Nicola Froggatt). Two papers look at research with museum publics – an area I’m pleased to make more space for: one reflects on a study of how we can support young children’s learning from science objects (Naomi Haywood, Karen Davies and Lauren Souter); the other explores the experience of government scientists at the point where privatisation radically changed the profession – it is especially effective and moving to hear these scientists speak about their experiences in their own voices (the full recordings are available to the public as part of the British Library National Life Stories project).

Issue 19 also features a paper by Prasannan Parthasarathi, the first Journal keynote speaker at November’s Research Conference, who gave an outstanding presentation on textile history from an Indian perspective. Prasannan’s piece represents the start of a new initiative for the Journal: a lecture series in which acclaimed international academics are invited by the Journal to give the keynote of the annual Science Museum Group Research conference. The lecture will link to the major theme of the conference which in turn relates a major research topic or project for the Science Museum Group. This year for instance the conference theme was the history of textiles and the conference was held at the Manchester Science and Industry Museum with presentations informing early thinking about the planned ‘Cottonopolis’ galleries there. The keynotes will then be published in the Journal.

Finally, one of the most interesting aspects of this year has been the opportunity to think about how the Journal structures and presents visual content. My vision for the Journal from its launch in 2024 has always been to treat images as a crucial part of research content, and as deserving of elegant and accessible presentation. But examples from the world of art and photography suggest new ways of doing this. What might a visual essay look like for the Journal, for example, where the images might tell the story with little or no text? Bringing together investigations of some of our Collaborative Doctoral students working on photographic collections, we began to explore this area. Michelle Henning, a member of the Journal’s Editorial Board and Professor of Photography and Media at Liverpool University, kindly ran a visual essay workshop for the Research conference, and we began to experiment in the Journal. The Congruence Engine issue provided ideal content due to the project’s use of photography and film as an investigative tool and Tim Smith generously allowed us to experiment with the formatting of his glorious industrial photographs. We learned a great deal (including about the constraints of our current Content Management System) and we aim to do more to develop functionality that will support visual and film essays in the future.

‘Our idea is that although we all have areas of expertise and experience, we also have our own understandings and interpretations of the wide-ranging areas the project intersects with.’

‘Surfaceing multiple perspectives on keywords for the Congruence Engine: embracing multiplicities, intersecting/sharing, and mutual learning’, by Stefania Zardini Lacedelli and Arran J Rees, Issue 18 © Tim Smith

‘We believe collaborative and dialogic writing can be a useful means of developing and reflecting future conversations across the Congruence Engine project and can play a key role in enabling participatory approaches in the creation of a national collection.’

‘Collaborative conversation as a method for exploring multiple perspectives on “community” and forms of knowledge in the Congruence Engine’, by Simon Popple, Stefania Zardini Lacedelli, Arran J Rees, Stuart Prior and Maggie Smith, Issue 18
HIGHLIGHTS

THE CONGRUENCE ENGINE

The three-year Congruence Engine project, which formally began in late 2021, is the largest research project the Science Museum Group has ever undertaken. One of five Discovery Projects within the AHRC Towards a National Collection funding stream, it is experimenting with powerful digital techniques to link items from across the nation’s heritage collections. It tackles the subject of industrial history – specifically the textiles, energy and communications sectors – but its techniques and findings will be of relevance across collections and themes of all kinds.

Think of millions of objects, pictures, archives, recordings, films and broadcasts relevant to the UK’s industrial history are held by hundreds of museums and other organisations across the UK. The problem is that all these items are held separately from each other, and their catalogue records are kept in a huge diversity of different formats in different systems. There is currently no way to search across those collections to find everything, or anything particular. And most often, the items’ catalogue records are basic, lacking data about their significance. Congruence Engine is, in a nutshell, an investigation using the example of industrial history into how we can overcome this separateness of collections, to enable collections of different kinds to speak to each other via their digital records.

With sixty per cent of the project behind us, we are enjoying an exciting and demanding programme of work. The team brings together five full-time research fellows, fourteen investigators from universities, the Science Museum Group and other heritage organisations and, currently, eight digital researchers. Eighteen project partners have variously provided the project with data and joined in with investigations. We are a multidisciplinary team working to create an interdisciplinary space of mutual enquiry that brings together the concerns and capabilities of curators, historians, and digital experts. The work is designed to develop techniques to ease the management of heritage collections and to enable new kinds of curatorial and historical endeavour at the same time as it develops new uses for machine learning techniques.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

On the face of it, you might think that the project brief simply demands a search engine that can work across all heritage organisation catalogues, looking from above as it were. But the thinness and inconsistency of the data makes that impossible. As team members John Stack and Jamie Urwin argue: ‘search engines generally poorly “understand” (heritage) collections online (and) struggle with search-ranking objects from different institutions (because) ranking is usually a measure of the search-ranking and optimisation of the institution’s website rather than the relevance of individual objects to the user’s search terms’. So, instead of trying to build a specialist search engine, in Congruence Engine we are experimenting with connecting data sideways, as it were, by linking it in a variety of ways, some tight and some looser.

The project is structured around a series of investigations, with 15 currently live, that unite digital technique with historical or curatorial questions. Whoever on the team is doing the investigation is modelling the kinds of activity that in future will be necessary to make collections linkable. Each of these involves the creation of ‘pipelines’ between analogue collections items, via digitisation and translation into machine-readable text, and finally to the creation of linkable descriptive terms. These terms are typically either dates or the names of people, places and organisations, or they are words that name things or show what subjects they relate to. Several of the investigations have gone beyond the creation of such terms and are showing how digital visualisation techniques can convey relations between data and the items they represent.

PROJECT PROGRESS

The more the project has gone on, the more the AHRC’s investment in research into this area has been justified. We have adopted an action research methodology to run the project. In this approach, we proceed via a series of iterative and collaborative research cycles that all include the steps of planning, doing, observing the doing, and reflecting on the process and results before planning the next cycle. This is an agile management approach that has allowed us to adjust the research to respond to discoveries and challenges along the way. Using this technique at the broadest level has enabled us to divide the project into three distinct phases:

• The first year was setup and small-scale investigations that demonstrated the need for a scale-up both in the quantity of data used and in the intensity of its digital processing.

• The second phase, responding to this, has had researchers answering historical questions by exploring how to create the ‘pipelines’ mentioned above.

• The third phase, which we are planning in detail now, will involve the main participatory phase of the project, where we will take our techniques to community groups, amateur and professional historians and museum colleagues for them to try out.

We see this activity through the metaphor of ‘social machine’. Making collections linkable cannot be one hundred per cent automated; it requires people to be involved, applying human insight to organise, categorise and interpret data. But it also needs their input to ask the questions that matter to them – in this case about industrial history – so that the national collection that is forged in linked open data is of value to those who would study and want to understand the nation’s industrial past.
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On 16 May 2023 a workshop titled ‘Calico, Chemistry and Congruence’ was held in the Science Museum’s Smith Centre to bring together new approaches to textiles history. In part continuing the theme of the Manchester Research Conference (see page 65), in part showcasing the digital historical approach of the Congruence Engine project (page 27), the workshop featured a standout session by the Group’s own Director, Sir Ian Blatchford on the contribution of Lyon Playfair, chemist and key figure in the establishment of the Great Exhibition. Here we ask Sir Ian about his fascination with Playfair, and how he mixes his love of research with his role as Director of a group of major national museums.

Sir Ian has previously published from his research in the Spring 21 issue of the Science Museum Group Journal, Lyon Playfair: chemist and commissioner, 1818–1858. His book on Lyon Playfair is currently in the process of publication.

What prompted you to write about Lyon Playfair?

As so often with juicy research projects, it was a matter of chance. When I left the V&A, where I was Deputy Director until 2010, I was given a range of delightful official presents including a splendid piece of 18th-century Derby porcelain (acquired from a dealer, not taken from the collection...). However, the Director – Sir Mark Jones – also gave me a copy of Sir Wemyss Reid’s 1899 Memoirs and Correspondence of Lyon Playfair. It was a typically wry provocation and in-joke. Most V&A colleagues are steeped in the mythology that the museum, both in inception and collections, was the sole brainchild of Henry Cole, and he certainly bestrides Anthony Burton’s great history of the museum (Vision and Accident, 1999). However, I think Mark felt that it was time to bring greater prominence to the role played by Playfair, both in delivery of the Great Exhibition and in the foundation of the South Kensington Museum. The Cole-Playfair partnership was crucial in the period 1851–1858 in delivering a range of national educational and cultural ambitions, and their working relationship was endlessly complex: collaborative, competitive, and prickly. And as ever, none of us can quite resist ‘what if’ questions too. Playfair left London to become Professor of Chemistry at Edinburgh in 1858, but what might the South Kensington Museum have become had he stayed around, and might the original Albertine vision of a museum uniting science and art have been possible?

Most definitely. I have now been researching him for four years, and I realise two things. First, that the sketchy Memoirs are a very partial indeed. At times, it is a seriously misleading narrative in which heated disputes are downplayed or omitted entirely; and his role in major scientific and political events is either overplayed or not given due weight. The Memoirs were commissioned by Lady Playfair, and published within a year of his death, so one could hardly expect perspective and balance. The more elegant experience is the degree to which one embraces the ‘mental world’ of 19th century Britain and how power was acquired and deployed. It’s a world in which Britain surveys a vast empire and Playfair seems to dine with everyone who rules it. His intellectual breadth and ‘address book’ are both thrilling but at times almost daunting for the biographer.

Has anything changed your view of his work and significance?

The Cole-Playfair partnership was crucial in the period 1851–1858 in delivering a range of national educational and cultural ambitions, and their working relationship was endlessly complex: collaborative, competitive, and prickly. And as ever, none of us can quite resist ‘what if’ questions too. Playfair left London to become Professor of Chemistry at Edinburgh in 1858, but what might the South Kensington Museum have become had he stayed around, and might the original Albertine vision of a museum uniting science and art have been possible?

Very early on I also realised that as an ‘art’ man running a science museum, I would be asked about the ‘Two Cultures’ problem, and Playfair’s long life is powerful evidence for how strange that debate would have appeared to most Victorians. A further gift from my V&A colleagues was a huge photograph of the sculptural doors that formed the main entrance to the museums in the 1860s. It is a wonderful ‘unified’ composition: Newton, Davy and Watt are joined by Bramante, Titian and Michelangelo.

Lyon Playfair, 1st Baron Playfair © National Portrait Gallery, London
tells much about how to win or lose in the great arena of public opinion. I am especially fascinated by his battles with two remarkable 19th-century women. First is Frances Power Cobbe, who was a leading light in the first serious anti-vivisection movement. At first the movement provoked debate and parliamentary sympathy, and Playfair had to fight hard for the scientific case for animal experimentation. However, Cobbe slipped into the classic trap of releasing numerous pamphlets and ‘performance’ campaigning. Her supporters loved it but persuading the vast body of moderate opinion ceased to be the focus. Public and political sympathy ebbed away, and some strands of the current environmental movement might consider some salutary lessons from her.

By contrast, Playfair’s compelling command of evidence could not hold back Josephine Butler in her campaign to repeal the controversial Contagious Diseases Acts. Playfair wanted to retain them to limit the spread of venereal diseases in the army and navy, but Butler outflanked him with a brilliant ‘spiritual’ campaign that appealed to the liberties and anxieties of working and middle classes alike.

Who and what has influenced your approach to research?

I have received generous advice from many colleagues but owe a special mention to three people: Robert Budd, Julius Bryant and Ludmilla Jordanova. Robert is Emeritus Keeper of Collections, has boundless expertise in 19th century science and has pointed me to great correspondence and other archival resources. Julius, who was Keeper of Word and Image/National Art Library, is a great guide to 19th century cultural thinking and mores, and sometimes I feel that he knew Prince Albert and Queen Victoria. More generally, Ludmilla (Professor Emeritus at Durham University and a former Science Museum trustee) has been a great mentor in the theoretical questions that underpin biography, good research techniques and sound scholarship. Actually, this reminds me that I should also mention two other amazing people.

Given my vast workload it can be difficult to maintain momentum and morale. Two wonderful people have kept me afloat over long lunches. First is Robert Anderson, former Director of the British Museum, and historian of chemistry. He certainly rivals Robert in knowledge. Second is Richard Holmes, whose Age of Wonder is a masterpiece of science history. Richard nudges me in the direction of connections and provocative thinking. We have also discussed the degree to which I am writing about Playfair himself or using him as a lens to provoke a fresh take on 19th century culture.

More generally, I have been swamped with kindness. The world of science history is not large, and word has spread. I have been delighted with the number of academic and curatorial colleagues who offered me relevant insights into their work where it touches upon chemistry and/or Playfair. At some point, I will need to make some tough editorial decisions based upon advice from all my supporters – or the Playfair biography will be about 5,000 pages long, in volume one alone!

Have you found any lessons in Playfair’s life?

The ‘lessons from his life’ questions run straight to heart of enduring questions about history itself: does it repeat and does it rhyme? What I find fascinating in his life as a public servant is the degree to which the reform and debate follows a character that we would recognise in our contemporary public realm. It might tell us that British public life has some recurring songs, and the biography offers some insights into our idiosyncrasies.

I wrote a blog in 2021 (Vaccination and the Victorians: Lyon Playfair’s Battle for Science) about his vigourous defence of compulsory smallpox vaccines, and how he was mocked and derided by the anti-vax movement. The pattern of specious logic and hostility in the late 19th century mirrors modern anti-vax zealotry to an unsettling degree. It is also extraordinary to see how Playfair’s ardent concern about the rise of French and German industry, and Britain’s weak productivity, chimes with the modern debate about the need to invest boldly in education and technology. British politicians have fretted about these issues all of my adult life, and yet they would find the answers in Playfair’s compelling reports and speeches.

His lengthy parliamentary career also

Left: Josephine Butler in 1851, portrait by George Richmond © National Portrait Gallery, London

RIGHT: Frances Power Cobbe, c. 1871

Has your research changed how you see your role as Director?

I am doing my bit to keep the cherished idea of Director as scholar alive. We are not returning, alas, to the golden age of Sir John Pope-Hennessy but I have witnessed how great directors like Neil MacGregor, Nick Serota and Mark Jones were able to do so. Whilst finding research times, especially in a job that involves so much travel and very long hours, is tough, the idea of research and the divine treat of sanctury in archives is an important preserver of sanity and meaning in one’s life.

I think the symbolism of a director as researcher is also powerful. It sends a timely message about the centrality of scholarship and is also means that I understand the true effort as scholars write books, and complete doctorates. I have invested much passion in creating and sustaining a research culture within the museum and building a strong ‘favoured nation’ status with key partners like AHRC.

What kinds of research would you most like to see/would you encourage others to pursue?

The Science Museum collections feel to me like the deepest pool of sweet water, and we are still paddling at the margins in terms of research potential.
But a long-running glossary project at the Scottish Sensory Centre (SSC) aims to address this deficiency by creating and codifying numerous new signs, focused on STEM subjects. The workshop used objects from the SMG collection to stimulate discussion between scientists from Royal Holloway University London (RHUL) and the BSL experts to identify where new signs were needed.

The RHUL academically, typically specialists in geophysics, selected an object from the collection and presented a short, informal lecture about it, describing its origins and applications. The sign language experts, led by Dr Audrey Cameron of the University of Edinburgh, who is the current head of the glossary project, then questioned the scientists on terminology used in the introductory speeches, before highlighting words that may need translating into BSL.

Together, participants then worked up potential signs, ensuring both clarity and specificity, while remaining faithful to the science behind the terms. “The real problem is the lack of vocabulary for sciences,” said Dr Cameron, who is a former chemistry teacher. “(Historically) we had to rely on finger spelling, so we realised it was important to set up a glossary.”

She added: “It’s been really useful to have a real object. If not, you’re talking about an abstract concept, so I think to see something really working in real life has really helped our understanding. We create signs by firstly understanding things in a visual context, and then trying to represent it in sign.”

Since its original pilot in 2005, the glossary has produced close to 2,000 signs, sorted into ten categories (astronomy, biology, chemistry, etc.), which is updated regularly. The SSC’s website displays a video demonstration of the sign alongside a precise signed definition. According to participants in the workshop, BSL interpreters often shy away from work in the science space, fearing that their lack of expertise will make their job far more complicated than usual. The lack of interpreters further compounds the issues facing deaf scientists and presents another reason a comprehensive glossary is so valuable.

At the Collections Centre, the BSL experts viewed objects including a 19th century model that, for the first time, traced the pathways of earth particles during an earthquake; a 19th century tide predictor, which enabled scientists to read off tide times for any given day, long before the physics of tides was understood; Gordon Dobson’s original ozone spectograph, designed in 1924 but versions of which were latterly crucial in understanding ozone depletion and levels of air pollution; and an early petrographic microscope, which uses polarised lenses to determine the properties of rocks and minerals.

“I do we need a sign for ‘polarisation’?” asked Dr Tracey Berry, a senior lecturer in physics at RHUL, while demonstrating the process to the workshop participants. Dr Berry had originally approached SMG with both an initial idea and potential funding for what became the day in Wroughton.

By the end of the workshop, several sign language signs were created, and the start of a process that will, after further refinement on the team’s return to Edinburgh, be formally introduced to the glossary. “We were really happy with the sign we’ve created,” Sahasrabudhe said. “It’s quite beautiful.”

Dr Cameron later confirmed up to ten signs discussed in Wroughton may eventually be included in the glossary.

The project was overseen by Dr Scott Anthony, Deputy Head of Research & Public History, and Fiona Slater, SSC’s Head of Access & Equity.

In mid-September, the Science Museum Group (SMG) immense National Collections Centre (NCC) in Wiltshire played host to a unique workshop designed to enhance scientific understanding among Britain’s deaf community.

A team of British Sign Language (BSL) experts, with backgrounds in science and linguistics, met with leading academics to delve into the SMG’s incredible repository of scientific objects – before emerging from the archive shelves to create some new science-specific BSL signs.

Each of Dr Cameron, Sahasrabudhe and their SSC colleagues – Sanchayeta Iyer, a PhD student at Heriot Watt University, and a research assistant on an international sign linguistics project. “Usually, you have meaning within the signs. It’s part of the grammatical rules of sign language.”
“We create signs by firstly understanding things in a visual context, and then trying to represent it in sign.”

As an educator, you want people to understand,” said Professor King. “It’s been very exciting to work with new people who look at the world in a different way slightly, and to look at the objects, be with the objects, describe your passion for them, and then have someone nomenclature them for their language. It’s very rewarding.”

He added: “Something that struck me today was how graphic a lot of the signs were... It’s interesting to see that the sign often boils down the nub of the issue. It reduces it to its bare minimum, and in that is a very simple explanation.”

With SMG preparing to open the NCC to the public, the workshop underlined the lasting value of its unique collection and its enduring relevance to contemporary education. It also emphasised SMG’s guiding ‘Open for All’ ethos and expanded on SMG’s current commitment to BSL in museum tours and video content.

“We’re really interested in the innovative ways we can work together in collaboration and thinking about being open for everyone,” said Slater, whose work at SMG focuses on accessibility. “We have a national collection here, it is for the nation, and it’s very important to us that everyone has access to it.”

Slater continued: “What’s really exciting is how the conversations were very much sparked by exploring an object and the materiality of the use of that object. It had such an impact on the hand shapes used and the gestures. Hopefully [the signs] get adopted and become part of the lexicon that will go on to expand people’s knowledge.”

Dr Cameron named only one drawback to the workshop. “One day was simply not enough,” she said.
KNOCKING DOWN THE PAYWALL: THE NEW OPEN ACCESS LANDSCAPE

EMILY REES
Open Access Consultant

How research is shared is changing. Until recently, research publications – normally in the form of articles, chapters, and books – lived behind paywalls, only available to those with institutional access to library resources or money to pay for journal subscription fees and copies of books. The rise of open access as a publishing model has noticeably interrupted this – more and more research publications are now being made freely available as digital copies shared online via open access journals, e-publishers, and repositories. Indeed, many UK-based institutions, including the United Kingdom Research Institute (UKRI), now stipulate that research publications attached to funded projects must be made available open access.

Open access is in many ways a game-changing paradigm within the research landscape, which, at its most promising, offers a more equitable, accessible mode of disseminating research that provides better value for money for those paying for it (including taxpayers). But what do these changes mean for research organisations in the galleries, libraries, archives, and museum (GLAM) sector like the Science Museum Group (SMG)?

One pressing implication comes from the fact that many SMG projects are funded by UKRI funding bodies, so these projects too will need to ensure that their research publications are published in compliance with the funders’ most up-to-date policies. The UKRI Open Access Policy, effective from January 2024, specifically requires that journal articles, monographs, books, and chapters in edited collections are made available open access, which SMG needs to adhere to.

The landscape is, however, evolving and the goal of making research outputs freely available online is becoming the ‘best practices’ norm. Indeed, the principle of open access research aligns with SMG’s wider goals of widening digital access and engaging global audiences with the Group’s research. For both these reasons, the Research & Public History team has initiated plans to make SMG research outputs available open access.

Repositories – digital storage facilities that provide a space to store outputs, which are catalogued and tagged to make them easily discoverable – are one pathway to open access. The UKRI policy, for example, states that research publications freely available in a repository meet their criteria. This bypasses the need to pay the sometimes prohibitive open article processing charges (APCs) that can be required to publish in an open access journal.

After a period of consultation led by Research & Public History, it was decided that joining the British Library Shared Research Repository, a bespoke digital storage facility for GLAM organisations, would be the most cost-effective and efficient way for SMG to acquire this vital piece of digital infrastructure. The initial population of the repository started in autumn 2023, with a launch in 2024. While SMG have their own repository dedicated to its research outputs, it is part of a larger shared scheme, as implied in the name, with other members including the British Library, the British Museum, and National Museums Scotland, thus situating SMG within this broader terrain of research-intensive GLAM organisations. For the first time, many different research outputs, ranging from the traditional to the non-traditional, written to multimedia, have been brought together in one place, where global audiences can find and download them.

Beyond the collation of traditional research outputs such as journal articles and PhD theses, the shared research repository is an opportunity to share a wide range of other research outputs created as part of research projects, which could include datasets, conference papers, presentation slides, etc. By sharing these wider research assets, the research process becomes more transparent, and a wider audience can engage with the research in its various forms.

For SMG, where research takes myriad forms, it does not have to be restricted to traditional academic research projects. Research takes place across the Group on a daily basis, for example, research for writing exhibition texts, investigating obscure parts of the collection, finding new conservation methods, creating learning resources, among many others. The long-term vision for the repository is that it will act as a conduit to a multitude of research outputs made by staff across all facets of SMG, not just Research & Public History. This breadth of exploration at the vanguard of museum practice and research.

In a shifting terrain where the definition and benefit of research – and who its practitioners are – is constantly being re-evaluated, membership of the shared research repository and further consultancy on the future of open access at SMG means we can continue a commitment to accessible, open and world-leading research. The open access pivot brings with it the opportunity for more innovative, digital-led integration of the research threads that underpin the programming across SMG.
UNI-VERSES: SPACE POETRY

JACK COOPER
Communications and Policy Outreach Officer, Imperial College London

The Great Exhibition Road Festival is a free annual celebration of science and the arts each summer in South Kensington. Having previously worked with cosmonaut Dr Helen Sharman on delivering live Zero Pressure podcast episodes at the festival as part of my role at Imperial College London, I knew how enthusiastic and open attendees were to learning and trying new things. This year’s festival seemed like the perfect opportunity to combine my passions for poetry and public engagement in a science-themed poetry workshop.

In 2022, the Research & Public History team commissioned me to celebrate the legacy of Czech immunologist and poet Miroslav Holub by writing new poems for a performance at a Science Museum Lates event. My experience of this project was nothing but positive and I knew the team were very supportive of activities that used the arts for science communication, so I saw them as natural partners for the science-themed poetry workshop. I also wanted to draw from the expertise of Science Museum curators when developing the workshop activities, who the team could connect me to. I proposed and delivered the activity for the 2023 festival under a dual Imperial College London and Science Museum banner. I organised the workshop along seven areas of space science with relevance to the Science Museum Group’s collections and Imperial College London’s research: galaxies, stars and star formation, Mars and the Curiosity Rover, Jupiter and the Jupiter Icy Moons Explorer, Dr Helen Sharman and her time on the Mir space station, the Moon and the Apollo missions, and Venus.

Attendees would walk into a spacious marquee on Imperial College Road and be approached by one of our resident space scientists. After choosing the area of space science that most interested them, the scientist would give them the lowdown on core facts and the latest research, being sure to emphasise facts that related to the (theoretical) human experience. For instance, the acoustic properties of a carbon dioxide-dominated atmosphere means you wouldn’t be able to hear high-pitched sounds like birdsong on Mars unless you were standing right next to the sound source. An immense dust cloud at the centre of our galaxy might taste like raspberries and smell like rum, due to the presence of ethyl formate! These were very much two-way conversations: the scientists weren’t following strict scripts. We wanted attendees to feel empowered to direct the conversation to where they were interested, and to feel comfortable asking any and all questions.

Attendees would then be directed to a seated area, where poets guided them through approachable writing exercises on the subject area that they had just discussed with their scientist. These exercises would slowly build attendees up from writing a single metaphor to an entire poem. While most exercises were geared towards young families (the festival’s primary target audience), advanced exercises were available for confident writers. Attendees were encouraged to write their poems on postcards printed specially for the workshop, which were then hung on washing lines that spanned the marquee’s roof. Before the end of the second day, every inch of these washing lines was taken by original science poems.

More than 700 people learned about the cutting edge of space science and took the plunge into creative writing due to the work of the volunteers, Imperial College London and the Science Museum. A successful two days!

Jack Cooper is Communications and Policy Outreach Officer at Imperial College London and an internationally published poet who received the Eric Gregory Award in 2022. Discover more of his work at www.jackcooperpoet.com
"An immense dust cloud at the centre of our galaxy might taste like raspberries and smell like rum, due to the presence of ethyl formate!"
The ReConnect/ReCollect project promoted a series of research seminars and a Creative Lab with the aim of creating dialogues and connecting expertise between a range of heritage practitioners, researchers, curators and artists from the UK and Indonesia. It was made possible by British Council Grant Connection Through Culture 2023, in collaboration with the Directorate General of Culture of Indonesia, Museum & Cagar Budaya, Indonesiana.tv, and the Science Museum Group. Through a dynamic exchange of ideas, participants shared their expertise in leveraging streamlined techniques such as digital storytelling, participatory engagement and community co-creation. This collaborative dialogue ignited a paradigm shift in the role of museums as active contributors to sustainable development and knowledge transfer, maximising the impact of their research efforts.

The programme was divided into three seminar sessions and a Creative Lab programme, involving average 50–70 participants from Indonesian and UK heritage, creative and research sectors, with representatives from the Museum Pusaka Lontar Bali, Museum Nasional Indonesia, Museum & Cagar Budaya Indonesia, Science Museum Group, Victoria and Albert Museum, British Museum, Wellcome Trust Collection, Laiden University, Napier University, University of Leeds, Ca’ Foscari University.

The first three panels of the seminar explored new directions in professional museum practice in Indonesia, contemporary research approaches and curatorial strategies on history of science and historical objects at the Science Museum Group and current trends of collection management, interpretation, and audiences for SEA heritage and material culture in Indonesia and the UK. The presenters raised interesting discussions on the importance of more research exchanges between UK and Indonesian museums, restitution, and the importance of creating public access of culture and heritage collections between the two countries.

The project also explored the pivotal role of digital technology in facilitating cross-cultural collaborations, engaging audiences beyond physical boundaries and contributing to innovation, broad access to cultural heritage and quality education. The Creative Lab promoted the creation of new digital narratives aimed to surface hidden connections between objects, sounds and places across Indonesian and UK museums. Guided by Stefania Zardini Lacedelli (Science Museum Group), Simon Poppel (University of Leeds) and Fabiana Fazzi (Ca’ Foscari University), a group of eleven Indonesian artists experimented with Yarn, a digital storytelling platform for community stories, and izi.TRAVEL, a geolocation app which supports the creation of sound walks. Experimenting with these tools, the participating artists developed two digital narratives: the first about ‘absence’ in the global collections of the representation of Indonesian culture, and the second about the concept of ‘weaponry’. The sessions raised creative dialogues between the facilitators and the participating artists, especially on how the artists can use the platforms for their artistic work and also develop new ways of artistic research on culture heritage and public history.

Within the project, decolonisation emerged as a pivotal theme, acknowledging the urgency to critically reassess the colonial legacy within museums and its enduring impact on collections, physical and digital narratives, and representation. The project provided a platform for focused discussions on decolonial practices, encompassing themes of cultural heritage repatriation, contextual re-evaluation of objects, and deconstruction of Western-centric perspectives by embracing diverse perspectives, fostering dialogue, and amplifying underrepresented narratives.

Links to the digital narrative: https://www.congruenceengine.community/stories/38
Your book centres on objects from Hawking’s office, which was recently acquired by the Science Museum. How did this approach affect your writing experience and process?

The contents of Stephen’s office offered a kind of magic key to unlock his life, so I was really enthusiastic about doing the book. Every one of my books has been an ordeal in one way or another, so I don’t take on a book project lightly! Each object, whether an inflatable beach ball, or a lava lamp, meant something to him and by that same token had a fascinating story to tell. Rather than write a traditional biography, as Graham Farmelo (who used to work in the museum) is now doing, and will succeed brilliantly I am sure, I could tell Stephen’s story as a series of short, bright essays focusing on each object.

What kind of reader do you think would especially love your book and what would you like them to take away from it?

Like all my books, I have tried to make it comprehensible to a general reader but not shied away from Stephen’s science, which deals with many head-spinning ideas. Because the book is episodic, it is possible to read it as a series of bite-sized and beautifully illustrated chunks, which makes it much easier to digest. I hope what comes over most to Stephen’s unquenchable zest for life that allowed him to achieve so much in life and science despite his huge physical challenges.

If you could pick one object from Hawking’s office that you could take home with you, what would it be, and why?

There are a lot of brilliant objects, such as the time travellers party invitation, or the book Stephen Hawking You Are Wrong, which of course he put on prominent display. The one that always makes me smile is his cream-coloured coxswain jacket. I find it touching that he treasured this jacket, and did not want it cleaned, because (I presume) it was a memory of his halcyon student days when he was thrown into the river during a victory celebration. This Oxford rowing tradition would have been inconceivable only a year after his diagnosis.

Science through the Keyhole is an AHRC-funded research network. Led by Jane Desborough (Pd) and Innes Keighren (CI, Royal Holloway), its aim is to bring together people from a range of disciplines to answer an overarching question of how to improve our displays of recreated scientific workspaces and, crucially, how to make them more inclusive. To come closer to achieving that goal through the network, a series of three workshops were planned and delivered, each with its own sub research question. Jane and Innes worked with project partners at three external organisations: University of Cambridge, Royal Museums Greenwich, and Museum of the Home. Each workshop was hosted, or part-hosted, at one of these institutions and project partners supported the development of the workshop plan and made contributions to the list of invitees, which was different for each workshop.

The three workshops took place in April, June and September. The first workshop took place over two days, on 17 and 18 April, and was co-developed with project partners Harry Cliff and Val Gibson (Department of Physics, University of Cambridge). The first day was spent at the Science Museum and the second at the Physics department in Cambridge. Twenty people attended over the two days and the group consisted of museum curators, museologists, historians of science, professional scientists, and historical geographers. The research question for this workshop was “What is the scientific workspace? (in the broadest sense)”. The second workshop took place over two days, on 28 and 29 June, and was co-developed with project partner Emily Akkermans (Royal Museums Greenwich). It was attended by 23 people, again from the same range of disciplines identified above but different individuals. The research question for this workshop was ‘How does science shape its spaces and vice versa?’. The third workshop was held on 5 September and was co-developed with project partner Danielle Patten (Museum of the Home); 26 people attended and the group once again had a similar composition but this time also included historical reenactors and new media professionals. The research question for this workshop was ‘How can we recreate/evolve a sense of a historic space?’.

Every workshop produced a considerable amount of discussion around each research question and there is much to digest. Now that the three workshops have taken place, the next steps are for Jane and Innes to meet with the project partners to plan a series of publications to share the findings of the research more widely. We plan to write and publish these in 2024.
In a time of widespread mistrust over the role of large-scale industry in politics and culture, a time of concerns about ‘dark money’ and corporate ‘reputation-laundering’ – a time when ‘Who funds you?’ has become a perennial refrain in political debate – relationships between museums and their industrial patrons are coming in for ever-more scrutiny. Under pressure from a range of voices, cultural organisations across the Western world have begun reviewing their relationships with major corporate donors, in some cases even ending those relationships entirely. Industrial patronage is an issue with which the heritage sector as a whole will have to contend for a long time to come.

Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration (MaILHoC) is a two-year interdisciplinary research project that aims to put the heritage sector in contemporary debate over corporate sponsorship in the heritage sector as a whole will have to contend for a long time to come. The Science Museum Group (SMG) is uniquely well-placed to act as a starting point for any consideration of the relationship between museums and industry. More than any other sector, museums of science, technology, and medicine (STM) are the direct products of the industrial era. MaILHoC proceeds from the recognition that STM heritage simply would not exist in its current form without the input of industry. It explores how this relationship has worked in practice, and how it has changed over time. It also asks why, and under what conditions, this relationship has come to be a source of ethical contention. It believes that answering these questions will reveal, not only about the cultural landscape the Science Museum Group now inhabits, but about how the museums sector can best equip itself to continue its role as a broker of important cultural conversations.

In doing so, it hopes to open the door to a more wide-ranging, multifaceted conversation about the ethics of industrial patronage in the 21st century. The Science Museum Group (SMG) is a direct product of the industrial era. MaILHoC proceeds from the recognition that STM heritage simply would not exist in its current form without the input of industry. It explores how this relationship has worked in practice, and how it has changed over time. It also asks why, and under what conditions, this relationship has come to be a source of ethical contention. It believes that answering these questions will reveal, not only about the cultural landscape the Science Museum Group now inhabits, but about how the museums sector can best equip itself to continue its role as a broker of important cultural conversations.

RESEARCH PROGRESS AND PLANS

The project consists of a core team of researchers at the Science Museum, Aix-Marseille Université, and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, with partners at King’s College London, Norsk Teknisk Museum, the University of London Press, and the think tank Demos. Three strands of the research each focus on a different national context, scoping and investigating case studies of moments in European history when industrial patronage could be said to have had a significant effect on the exhibition of science, technology, and medicine – as well as on the debates surrounding it.

Postdoctoral researchers working on the UK context, for example, are looking into the complex relationship between the demands of industrial sponsors, curators and museum-going publics at the 20th-century Science Museum, and mapping this onto the story of how display techniques have evolved there. Colleagues in France are currently exploring the collaborations between museums, scientists, and industrial interests in international exhibitions like the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair (Expo 58). The Spanish team will take the emergence of science centres in the post-Franco period as its primary focus.

The aim will be to bring together these case studies for a range of scholarly and non-scholarly research outputs. Journal articles, edited collections and academic conference presentations will go alongside public engagement events, workshops, reading groups and film screenings. The project team will conduct oral history and other interviews with current and former museum professionals, activists, industrial policymakers and executives. At the time of writing, a series of stakeholder workshops are being planned for 2024 and 2025.

MAILHOC WORKSHOP, 20–21 JULY

MaILHoC began officially in May 2023, and hosted its inaugural workshop in July at the Dana Research Centre at the Science Museum. The two-day event offered the first chance for the project team to meet and discuss the current and likely directions of the project. The event opened with a roundtable discussion on the industrial sponsorship of science museums. It featured several current and former SMG curators, science communication professionals, and filmmakers, and gave an opportunity to hear from the people with some of the most intimate knowledge of the dynamics of industrial and corporate patronage in the museum sector. Other sessions gave the project team a chance to connect with the project partners, University of London Press and Demos, Dr John Owens, Senior Lecturer in Ethics and Public Policy at King’s College London hosted a well-received seminar introducing the team to contemporary approaches to applied ethics.

The public keynote at the workshop was provided by Dinah Casson, exhibition designer and author of the recently published Closed on Mondays, a glimpse ‘behind the scenes’ of the world of museums.

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The public keynote at the workshop was provided by Dinah Casson, exhibition designer and author of the recently published Closed on Mondays, a glimpse ‘behind the scenes’ of the world of museums.
From September 2022 I stepped into the role of African Collection Research Curator. My main task was to help the Science Museum Group (SMG) to better understand the provenance, significance and future research and engagement opportunities regarding SMG’s Wellcome African material on long-term loan from the Wellcome Trust. I completed this project in September 2023, although I will be continuing to develop strands of this work in my new post at the University of Southampton, and SMG has a new Research Fellow - Catherine Elliott - who will also be developing projects with the African Collections. One key achievement is a report, that is currently in preparation, provisionally entitled: Imperial Legacies and Decolonial Futures: Investigating the Science Museum Group’s ‘Wellcome’ African Material, which provides an overview of the history and current state of the Wellcome African collection. Its aim is to provide an overview examination of the history and current state of the Wellcome African collection which would enable the SMG and Wellcome to forge future methods of strategic engagement in line with the priorities of both institutions.

There were, and remain, three pressing reasons contributing to the urgency of this task. Firstly, the Wellcome African collection has been little explored since the 1970s and so remains little understood on an SMG-wide level. This equates to a recently recognised collection that is not yet well understood despite both Wellcome and SMG’s priorities to be in possession of collections that are well understood. Secondly, through its enhancing the SMG is able to build stronger relationships with relevant African communities, academics and cultural experts. This is crucial given the opening of the National Collections Centre and its plans for public tours, schools and research visits from 2024 onwards. And finally, enhancing the Wellcome African collection means that the SMG can better represent narratives of African history and knowledge in its displays, which will have a positive impact on audience reach both in-person and digitally, directly supporting the SMG’s core value of being ‘Open for All’.

To get a sense of the content of my report here are some key findings. The Wellcome African collection consists of 4,922 object records documenting materials relating to Africa. Materials come from almost all regions of Africa – mostly during the 19th and 20th centuries – although significant amounts also date to much earlier periods, such as Egyptian and Sudanese archaeological materials. Some 75 per cent of the collection has been catalogued to a BASIC level whilst only three per cent has been catalogued to an ENHANCED level. This equates to a recently recognised collection that is not yet well understood despite both Wellcome and SMG’s priorities to be in possession of collections that are well understood.

In rounding up the report I put forward a set of recommendations which included: stronger community and research expert engagement; seeking more funded opportunities; proactive restitution and repatriation efforts in line with Wellcome policies; updating documentation and cataloguing; updating the SMG website and displays; and a number of others. Investigating the SMG’s African collections was an incredibly complicated task given the constraints of funding and time. However, the work is intended to encourage and prime the creation of dedicated resources for research, as well as the community and expert engagement, that is essential for the understanding of the collection in the long term. Although these efforts will necessarily mean coming to terms with disturbing colonial histories and uncomfortable contemporary realities within SMG-held collections (such as those found within the Wellcome African collection), the activity of decolonisation should ultimately be understood as an opportunity for building bridges and establishing new relationships, local and beyond, with groups who have historically been marginal to the activity of British museums. If utilised effectively, the SMG’s Wellcome African collection can serve the purpose of ‘Inspiring Futures’.
Between 1837 and 1886 enslavement and railways intertwined on the island of Cuba. Enslaved people laboured to build the railways, were moved along it like goods by enslavers, worked steam-powered machinery on the plantations where they were enslaved, and watched as the lines connected new sugar plantations to export ports pouring their unfree produce back to Europe and the United States. This connection only ended in 1886 when slavery was finally abolished on the island.

The Cuban story is just one of many where steam-power and the work of enslaved peoples were profoundly connected. Too often we think of slavery as an agricultural activity, one that predates the railways. This isn’t helped by the dates, particularly in the British context. Even as Britain’s nascent railway network began to spread in the 1830s the government, already having outlawed the Slave Trade in 1807, abolished slavery across the Empire in 1834. With just a few years of overlap, it is often argued, there was very little connection between slavery and the railways.

Our network set out last year to explore how the real story goes far deeper than this. Featuring curators from the National Railway Museum, the Science and Industry Museum, and Leeds Industrial Museums, archivists from the Borthwick Institute, and academics from the Universities of York, Sheffield and Leeds, it was supported by the White Rose University Consortium.

Collaborators met on-and-off throughout most of 2022 and into 2023 at a variety of sites. We were very much starting from a position of ignorance – participants had very partial knowledge of the topic. Some were experts on the particular technologies they studied or curated, others had studied the lives of enslaved people and the systems of enslavement that bound them. The network has been a learning curve for many, with the disciplinary backgrounds of participants very useful.

We learned, for instance, that a network of early steamships connected slave plantations on Caribbean islands before the railways arrived in force in the region; that Liverpool and Bristol merchant groups were both major receivers of compensation money for emancipation and also huge early investors in the railways; and that company law and shareholding was directly shaped by the experience of enslavement – feeding into how investors understood and invested in technologies of the steam age.

This was a truly global project too. Research papers covered the well-known North Atlantic triangle connecting Europe, North America and the Caribbean, and Africa, but also branched out to South America, southern Africa, India, and beyond. It also raised interesting questions about scope. How should we address places such as Jamaica or India where systems of slavery either ended before the coming of the railways or were never implemented to begin with, but whose railway construction was dominated by the use of poorly paid and exploited labour?

It was a project that pushed at the limits of our collections and archives – the Science and Industry Museum’s Manchester and cotton collections cover that early 1820s–1840s story of North American slavery, but the NRM’s collections are much richer on the post-enslavement world of murky and exploited indigenous labour. It also pushed the collective to the limits of capacity – there was a general acknowledgment by the end that more research would need not just new collections but new collaborators from the regions and cultures discussed.

At present, the network is publishing its findings in the form of an accessible handbook. Aimed at museum staff, researchers and the general public, it offers an introduction to the connections between slavery and steam – providing both factual discussion and a justification of why this research is vital. We aim to push this collaboration forward though, exploring the profound connections between enslaved people and steam technology in all its facets with new sources and collaborators in the near future.
ANNUAL REPORT 2022–23

THE MONOTYPE COLLECTION

HANNAH BRIGNELL
Senior Collections Services Project Manager

The Monotype Collection of hot-metal typesetting equipment has been on long-term loan to the Type Archive in Stockwell for the last thirty years, being used and researched. The Type Archive closed its doors in 2022. To capture and preserve the unique skills and knowledge of the volunteers, many of whom worked at Monotype or have a background in typefounding, we commissioned two films following the detailed process from drawing to print and documenting highlights of Monotype history. The films provide an insight into Monotype and show the impacts it had across the world. This work and the rehoming of the Monotype Collection have been made possible thanks to support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Over the past two years the National Railway Museum (NRM) has worked to make the archive of early railway pioneer Leonard Raisbeck accessible prior to the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway (S&DR) in 2025.

The Leonard Raisbeck Archive contains a mixture of letters, legal records, memoranda, pamphlets, notices and reports. Some records date back to the reign of Charles II, the oldest items in the NRM’s archive collections, with the bulk dating from the early 19th century when the S&DR was founded and began operations. The items include a resolution and subscription paper in which the word ‘railway’ first appears in relation to the transport link that would become the S&DR. It also contains correspondence with such luminaries as Edward Pease and George Stephenson who figured large in the history of S&DR and early railways more broadly.

The archive’s creator, Leonard Raisbeck, served as joint solicitor and secretary to the S&DR’s Committee. A landowner and lawyer, he used his position in local society to argue the case for the construction of the railway. He was the first person to suggest that a railway, instead of a canal, should link the towns of Stockton-on-Tees and Darlington to transport coal from the South Durham collieries to ports on the River Tees. As well as being a key figure in the S&DR’s conception, Raisbeck was one of the S&DR figures who played an antagonist to the Committee’s controversial decision to extend the railway to Middlesbrough, bypassing his native Stockton-on-Tees.

The archive arrived carefully folded into bundles, and its immense historical significance justified the full gamut of archival processing work in making its contents accessible to online researchers. The 258 items in the collection were individually catalogued by collaborative PhD students and colleagues from across Collections & Research. Select items were conserved in preparation for the complete digitisation of every item in the collection. Even the back of scraps of paper were photographed in high-resolution by the NRM’s Photo Studio, resulting in 734 images that are displayed on the Collections Online catalogue records. Around 48 per cent of the items were also transcribed by remote volunteers to help overcome any difficulty researchers may have reading handwriting of varying legibility and with laissez-faire spelling. A small number of documents were translated from Latin to aid accessibility further.

Making this archive available provides novel insight into the formative years of the S&DR and the genesis of the railway age and is an important primer for the run-up to the anniversary celebrations. Raisbeck’s role as solicitor affords perspective on the S&DR as they focus on the strains on personal and professional relationships and charged behind-the-scenes discussions that were the human complexities inherent in bringing the S&DR into fruition. Raisbeck was the leading proponent of the railway in Stockton-on-Tees, and his archive highlights the role played by regional rivalries and geopolitics that is to be found in the earliest chapters of the S&DR’s story onwards. Just as railways spread nationally and globally from North East England, making this archive freely accessible to researchers online similarly seeks to share this rich historical resource beyond the walls of the NRM archive collections.

THE RAISBECK ARCHIVE

TANIA PARKER
Associate Archivist, National Railway Museum

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ABOVE: Map showing the intended route for the Stockton & Darlington Railway taped into a pamphlet entitled ‘A Further Report on the Intended Rail or Tram Road, from Stockton, by Darlington, to the coal mines, with a branch to Yarm [sic]’ RAIS/3/1/3
The past year has been exciting in many ways for the National Collections Centre (NCC). Thousands of objects have been carefully packed by teams at Blythe House and transported to their new home in Building ONE, and objects already on site at Wroughton are being prepared by the Internal Moves team for their new locations. Building ONE is looking more spectacular than ever!

Since joining the team in March 2023, I have been working to build a research strategy for the NCC which ties in with Science Museum Group (SMG) goals, exploring how to support staff, research, and building new partnerships for research in the future. Research is ongoing every day at the NCC as part of the One Collections Review team, and staff are working on many exciting strands to make the National Collections Centre a hub for SMG research in the future. Assistant Curators based at Blythe House (Kerry Grist and Georgia Iwanyanchi) and on site at the NCC (Esme Mahoney-Phillips, Katie Crowson and Sabrina Ruffino Guimmara) have been researching many objects which are making their way here. This work, often requiring extensive provenance research, helps to improve the cataloguing of our collection: reconciling objects on ‘temporary’ numbers with their original acquisition numbers, correcting historic cataloguing errors, providing information about hazards which allow for safe transportation and storage, and improving records. Recent exciting examples include Kerry’s research on object number 2022-1384, a sample of fabric and wood from the original Wright Brothers 1903 aircraft. This work uncovered that these samples, with a facsimile letter from Orville Wright, were sent in the 1940s to ‘souvenir hunters’ as a ‘gift’ in the hopes parts of the 1905 flyer taken as souvenirs would be returned to help the restoration of the 1905 flyer for display at the Carillon Historical Park. Esme’s work on an object in Weighing and Measuring is a great example of how the work of Assistant Curators helps to resolve mysteries which sometimes arise over many decades of collecting. By researching 1883-40/1, a model of the balance used for weighing and sorting coins at the Royal Mint, she was able to resolve three objects which had been given temporary numbers, and create seven new object ‘parts’. This has led to more accurate cataloguing of both the model and another collection item, 1876-374 (a decimal balance used for educational purposes). This research is essential in further understanding and caring for SMG Collections.

The Collections Review team (Hannah Brignell, Hannah Reeves, Charlie Southerton and Marina Rees) have been working hard to assess several areas of the SMG Collection. These reviews help to ensure that our collections reflect SMG priorities, and make sure that the Group identifies the historical significance of objects we care for. The team have been working with SMG-held material including tech files to investigate provenance, hazards and condition to assist curators in reviewing collections, as well as writing more thorough interpretation for object records visible to the public. This year several areas of the collection have been reviewed, including Industrial Chemistry, Geophysics, and Carriages and Submersibles (in preparation for some of the latter to move into Building ONE).

Curator Will Sims and Southampton PhD student Will Law have been working to better understand one of the biggest objects going into the free-standing area of Building ONE: the Rhodesia Railways carriage. They are now developing a bigger project which will consider some of the ‘archival silences’ which exist in railway history and contribute to knowledge about the experiences of Black Africans who built and used the railway system in an area with a long history of racial segregation. It is hoped that some field research will be undertaken in Africa, linking up with museums in Zimbabwe and Zambia. This research also feeds into One Collection work by asking questions about whose stories are told – and not told – by our object records, and how we might go about presenting these stories in a space like the NCC – and not told – by our object records, and how we might go about presenting these stories in a space like the NCC.

Elsewhere at the NCC we are developing potential academic collaborations with local and national partners. We are awaiting funding decisions on several Fellowship projects which will actively engage with collections held at the NCC – from explorations of 19th-century synthetic dyes to work linking stereoscopic technologies used in scientific teaching and learning. Newly researched and documented collections, such as the Stephen Hawking Office Collection, offer exciting new possibilities for research in the future. We look forward to supporting more exciting projects like these as our capacity grows and the Science and Innovation Park develops.

2024 will be a landmark year for the National Collections Centre – the year that we welcome visitors on site after many years of being mostly closed to the public. The staff at the NCC are pioneering best practice in Collections Management through research in sustainability, collections care, object storage and conservation. Our Fantastic Collections Access Facilitators (Helen Rayner, Mark Day and Robyn Lennox) are working with Curatorial teams to research and develop a range of dynamic public tours, and all NCC teams are busy getting the site, buildings and collections ready to welcome external researchers from Spring 2024. The SMG Collection will be more accessible than ever, thanks to the hard work of teams across the Group.
UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has recently made a major and long-term £80 million investment in UK heritage science. Titled RICHeS (Research Infrastructure for Conservation and Heritage Science) it aims to strengthen UK heritage science and transform its capability by building a network of facilities, collections and expertise complemented by a strategic hub and a digital activities programme. The Science Museum Group (SMG), led by the Conservation Department, has applied for two funded opportunities.

For funding to host scientific reference collections, SMG’s bid is titled ‘Empowering Safety: Hazardous Materials Awareness, Identification and Management’. It addresses a major challenge - the effective management of hazards within collections. Heritage science in the UK has traditionally focused on archaeological and art collections, while STEM collections have, on the whole, been overlooked. STEM collections are very likely to contain hidden hazards, from asbestos to radiation. Current hazard management training and advice is limited, leaving both objects and those that care for them vulnerable and reducing access to collections. Up to now there has been no systematic research programme to identify and share information on hazards in collections. ‘Empowering Safety’ will both raise awareness and give professionals tools to identify and manage hazards, increasing safe collection access. It will develop a hazardous materials library and data set, which will range from basic hazard information to scientific spectra, enabling the identification of specific hazards. Impact will be maximised by the sharing of high-level hazard information on the SMG’s website, so it can be accessible to anyone searching for information on an object type. It will give the heritage sector the capability and capacity to meet user demand and deliver scientific excellence for the collections.

For RICHeS funding to host research equipment and facilities, SMG’s bid is titled ‘Instruments of Discovery: Exploring Museum Objects with Scientific Equipment’, which addresses the preservation challenges of STEM collections due to their manufacturing materials and techniques that were not designed to last for long periods of time, are experimental in composition, or by their sheer scale. It will enable appropriate conservation as well as future innovation through new discoveries concerning materials and manufacturing processes. There has been limited scientific research and few publications regarding the materials composition of scientific and technological collections, and evidence shows that there is a skills and knowledge gap in industrial heritage. A Gas Chromatography Mass Spectrometry (GCMS) device would allow better scientific understanding of materials in science collections, and a conservation scientist on staff would provide access and expertise in the use of the equipment.

Funding outcomes will be announced around May next year. These grants would offer a timely opportunity to capitalise on the development of SMG’s National Collections Centre as it starts to provide research access from 2024. SMG’s strategy Inspiring Futures 2022-2030 describes conservation science as a new organisational priority, and investment in infrastructure for scientific analysis in STEM collections and/or a hazardous material library, both in physical and digital forms. If successful, these projects could have a transformative impact on the heritage science sector and the wider museums community.

In 2022 the Science Museum Research & Public History department sought to approach these questions through a collaboration with the Czech Community Centre, celebrating the life and work of Czech poet and immunologist Miroslav Holub. We were joined by celebrated poet Jack Cooper at the Science Museum Lates, who reflected on his favourite poems of Holub’s. Selected poems with photographs by Václav Jirásek are featured overleaf.
A HELPING HAND

We gave a helping hand to grass –
and it turned into corn.
We gave a helping hand to fire –
and it turned into a rocket.
Hesitantly,
cautiously,
we give a helping hand
to people,
to some people...
(Miroslav Holub)

Whoever awaits a word about the
sublime will get the ordinary from
Holub, whoever expects a secret will
get routine and drudgery, whoever
waits for God will get a broom to sweep
away the cobwebs
(Michal Nanou)

Science communication bridges the
gap between human understanding
and complex theories and data. Holub’s
poetry takes this one step further by
addressing the incomprehensible,
asking his readers to think around
complex topics instead of seeking a
definite truth.

BRIEF REFLECTION ON DEATH

Many people act
as if they hadn’t been born yet.
Meanwhile, however,
William Burroughs, asked by a student
if he believed in life after death,
replied:
– And how do you know you haven’t
died yet?
(Václav Jirásek, from Devils)

The SMG Research & Public History
group are continuously seeking ways
to push the boundaries of science
communication. We enjoy collaborating
with external researchers and artists
to produce creative responses to
topics both present in our collections
and beyond. If you have an idea,
get in touch at research@
sciencemuseum.ac.uk.

(影像)

Václav Jirásek, from Upsyч316a

ON SCIENCE, POETRY AND HUMANITY

ON SCIENCE, POETRY AND HUMANITY
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OCCUPATIONAL REPORTS

OCCUPATIONAL REPORT

KATHLEEN WALKER-MEIKLE
Research Grants Manager

VICKI BLUD
Research Grants Manager

ERIS WILLIAMS REED
Former Research Manager, Postgraduate and Skills

Research informs everything we do at the Science Museum Group (SMG). From developing new insights about our collections to enhancing our understanding of the history of science, technology and medicine, researchers and their projects contribute significantly to the museums’ programmes and objectives.

Research is embedded at each of SMG’s five museums and the National Collections Centre (NCC) at Wroughton. The NCC will offer an exciting, unprecedented opportunity for researchers to examine both objects and their related archival material at the same time.

We work collaboratively with researchers at all career stages to realise the full potential of our collections and to uncover new stories in our objects and archival material. Here are some of the ways researchers can collaborate with us.

Masters at SMG

Taught postgraduate students studying in UCL’s Science and Technology Studies department are welcome to join our ‘Curating Science and Technology’ module which runs for ten weeks every spring. The module is designed around a simple question: How is the museum a different environment for historical and interpretative work related to science and technology, as compared with a university? It opens up access to the Science Museum’s galleries, collections and curators, revealing the ways that the history of science and technology are preserved, researched and displayed in a national museum.

Curators and other researchers present and discuss a variety of case studies, helping students to acquire a rich sense of what it means to curate science, and especially the history of science, in a public museum. This year, students explored topics ranging from curating science fiction to discovering LGBTQ+ histories in the collection.

PhD Research

SmG holds many research events at the Group’s museums, including conferences, workshops and seminar series. We welcome the opportunity to develop projects that enhance our understanding of the collections, both in terms of material histories and the contexts of their creation. We also collaborate regularly on research projects with UK and international university partners, either as Principal Investigator, Co-Investigator or Project Partner. Awarded grants in progress include the Towards a National Collection; Congruence Engine (with co-investigators across eight UK institutions); MailHOC (Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration); with co-investigators at the Universitat d’Aix-Marseille and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; Communicating Time and Culture (with co-investigators across eight UK institutions); and the Network grant, which is linked to the Zimingzhong exhibition; and the Network grant Collections, Communities and the Twenty-first Century Museums Store, with the University of Westminster.

Funding opportunities

Students can undertake a significant PhD research project while developing knowledge, skills and experience. Studentships are for four years (full-time), including up to six months of professional development activities (e.g. placements, training). Students can undertake a significant PhD research project while developing a range of valuable professional skills.

Research Associates

Scholars can apply to become a research associate at the Research & Public History department. This offers the opportunity to have institutional affiliation while supporting long-term research relationships and projects in any stage of development. Although the position is unpaid, research associates have a SmG email address, ID card and access to subscribed online resources. Subject to space issues, research associates may be able to ‘hot desk’ space at times at the Dana Research Centre and Library. Individuals on research sabbaticals or research fellows in receipt of individual funding, including United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI), the Wellcome Trust, Leverhulme and European funding bodies, are also encouraged to apply to be Research Associates. Research associates without funding in place are encouraged to work on developing, with the assistance of the Research & Public History Department, and relevant SmG curatorial staff, a collaborative grant proposal that can be submitted to a suitable funder.

Research Conversations

The multi-disciplinary Science Museum Group Journal is an exciting avenue for publishing research on a wide variety of topics that are relevant to science, technology and medicine museums worldwide, and history of science material culture. The Journal has always been open access, which increasingly is a requirement of many funders, and guarantees the widest readership possible. Articles and features are published in multiple different formats, on a web platform that supports a variety of media. Additionally, we have always encouraged contributions from scholars and practitioners from across the world, and at all stages of their careers. Our journal features both articles from senior scholars and those publishing a peer-reviewed article for the first time.

If you would like to study or research with us, please take a look at our website. https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/our-work/research-public-history; or e-mail us at research@sciencemuseum.ac.uk.
GET INVOLVED WITH OUR DOCTORAL PROGRAMME

ERIS WILLIAMS REED
Former Research Manager

OUR COLLABORATIVE DOCTORATES AT A GLANCE

We host a significant number of doctoral students engaged in research across the Science Museum Group (SMG). Since 2013, 25 of our students have been awarded PhDs and, at any one time, we have over 30 students conducting doctoral research at our museums. Our PhD students engage with interdisciplinary collections, develop innovative methodologies, and address key issues on science’s role in past, present and future societies.

We lead the Science Museums & Archives Consortium, which also includes BT Group Archives, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers); and the Royal Society. Together, we run the Collaborative Doctoral Partnerships (CDP) scheme to support PhD studentships funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Students funded via this route are jointly supervised by museum professionals within the consortium alongside research specialists in universities across the UK. To date, we have supervised students in collaboration with over 30 universities from Aberdeen to Exeter.

INNOVATION AND IMPACT

The CDP scheme provides a special opportunity for doctoral students to work across both university and research-led museum and archives environments. Studentships are four years (full-time), including up to six months’ professional development activities (e.g., placements, training). Students can therefore undertake a significant PhD research project while developing a range of valuable professional skills. Our students have, for instance, supported the redevelopment of Shaton Hall at the National Railway Museum, where their research informed new interpretative displays about the lives of railway workers, passengers and underrepresented stories from railway history. The CDP scheme also enables students to apply their historical research skills in new contexts and sectors via, for example, UKRI Policy Internships in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Our students’ projects cover diverse ground and are at the forefront of new agendas in museum research. Examples of current topics include: collecting and displaying the ecological crisis, participatory practice in science and technology, and contribution of women of colour to science and industry. The research undertaken by our students deepens our understanding of our collections and often uncovers untold stories, such as the lives of railway labourers, textile workers and music technicians.

NEW DIRECTIONS

In spring 2023, we received funding from the AHRC to support nine studentships over three years, with the first cohort of students starting from October 2024. We will prioritise projects that will benefit the consortium in multiple areas, including:

- How we understand, care for and/or communicate our collections
- How research can enhance our public programmes
- The skills, knowledge and professional development of people in our organisations
- How different communities engage with our organisations, be they visitors to our physical or online spaces, or professionals across different sectors.

WE WILL ALSO SUPPORT PROJECTS THAT ALIGN WITH OUR DOCTORAL RESEARCH PRIORITIES:

ENVIRONMENT & SOCIETY: Our past, present and future relationship with the natural world, including environmental histories and technologies; sustainability of our collections; and environmental exploration.

ACCESS & IDENTITY: Who can access our collections and who is represented in them, including colonial legacies in our collections or organisations; collections and histories of gender and/or sexuality; and disabled experiences in our collections, spaces or communities.

DIGITAL COLLECTIONS, INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION: Our scientific and collections data, from paper circulation to digital communities, including: machine learning, research and collections management; collections, audiences and science communication; and digital preservation and historical information management.
The Curiosity Award is an exciting new scheme run by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), representing an evolution of their responsive mode funding opportunities. Although to some extent it replaces the old Research Networking Scheme, which ended earlier this year, it offers a larger scope and much more flexibility for applicants: chief among its innovations are that it can fund projects of up to five years’ duration, with a budget ceiling of £100,000 (FEC, of which the AHRC provides 80 per cent), and there is no requirement to have a PhD in order to be a Project Lead.

The scheme cycles through several rounds of applications a year, each window remaining open for approximately three months with results another three months after the deadline. The agility of the Curiosity scheme and its multiple submission windows are enabled in part by a lighter review process at this level: as part of the AHRC’s efforts to respond to the changing research landscape and economic realities, Curiosity rewards innovative knowledge and bold public engagement, and its principles embrace a higher risk and reward threshold than previous schemes.

The range of work and outputs supported by Curiosity is intentionally broad: the AHRC’s indicative list of potential projects includes early-stage innovation (e.g., idea generation, scoping and piloting activities, seed-corn funding), new approaches (e.g., supporting a career pivot, developing novel research methods or perspectives, funding mentorship), and expansion (e.g., building networks, partnerships and/or international relationships, creating and promoting public engagement). However, there is no definitive list of eligible activities, and eligibility to be a Project Lead is self-defined rather than being defined in terms of role or years post-qualification. The emphasis is very much on projects that will continue to generate ideas and enable researchers to continue growing in their careers.

**CURIouser AND CURIOUSER**

At the Science Museum Group (SMG), igniting curiosity is one of our core values, and this new funding opportunity is one that we would love to help colleagues take full advantage of. As an Independent Research Organisation SMG is eligible to receive AHRC funding directly, and the emphasis on collaboration, networking and innovation makes our sites an ideal home for ambitious and unexpected projects under the Curiosity Award scheme. As responsive mode funding becomes more flexible and expansive, it is also becoming less risk-averse and more geared towards the development of people, not just ideas.

Do you have a passion project that you’d love time and support to develop? Have you nurtured a fledgling network of colleagues or made meaningful connections with local interest groups that could benefit the community and the museum? Do you want to investigate an established collection in a new way? Do you want the opportunity to develop a new area of specialisation or take a new direction in your career path? Do you think about the difference this project can make, and to whom, and are you eager to find out where the ideas lead?

More information on the Curiosity Award can be found at [https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/ahrc-responsive-mode-curiosity-award](https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/ahrc-responsive-mode-curiosity-award) or by emailing us at research@sciencemuseum.ac.uk.

For 2024, the Research & Public History team are developing a mentorship scheme for colleagues who want to submit applications for a Curiosity Award. This is a course designed to support potential applicants in developing their ideas and crafting a strong proposal, incorporating workshops, troubleshooting sessions, feedback from the Research & Public History team, and providing resources for after the outcome of the application, whether that is managing a successful bid or exploring other opportunities.
Research events at the Science Museum Group (SMG) are built around bringing academics, professionals and the public together to discuss and debate current topics in STEM. Through these events, we aim to bring people together to foster honest conversations and new perspectives on this rapidly changing industry.

Following on from a successful series on Japan’s space development in 2021, our 2022/23 Space Seminar Series Two, featuring the development of space activity in East and South East Asia, co-hosted with JAXA Space Education Centre, pulled people into a new world and encouraged them to think bigger. Participants heard about the importance of space activities, from the regional launch of small satellite projects to the application of space technology to global sustainable development, across Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines from leading experts such as Hazuki Mori and Runggu Prilla Ardes.

Our events come together through organic conversations and shared interests between external collaborators and the Research & Public History Department. As a result of this welcoming approach, we have hosted a diverse selection of events showcasing the work of academics and professionals dedicated to benefiting local and global communities. ‘Live @ Dana Library’ series is a great example. The series spotlights the ambitions of those leading the sector and open these ideas up to public debate. In March 2023, we had dynamic Q&A sessions led by Silkie Carlo, Director of Big Brother Watch, on information warfare during Covid-19, and a vibrant conversation on the secret histories of British architecture in the Dominions led by Owen Hatherley, author of Artificial Islands: Adventures in the Dominions. Research events at SMG are also a great way to learn more about the wider context of our ongoing projects. ‘Calico, Chemistry and Congruence’, an at-museum workshop held in May 2023, pooled knowledge on the history of the textiles industry. Participants enjoyed talks given by Dr Pete Maw who spoke about the overseas trade in Manchester printed calicos between c.1760-1850, whilst a talk on the alkali trade and textiles in the North West was delivered by Dr Will Ashworth. Later on in the day, we heard from Dr Robert Bud on the case of Industrial Chemistry, Dr Kate Strasdin on the dress diary of Mrs Anne Sykes and exploring a textile curators mind through archival catalogues from Dr Tim Bown, Head of Research & Public History at SMG. This knowledge exchange supported the AHRC-funded National Collection Discovery Project. Congruence Engine and spotlighted research that sheds new light on the history of textiles, through various approaches from material culture studies to economic history featuring a keynote speech from Sir Ian Blackford, Director of the Science Museum Group.

This workshop followed on nicely from the two-day conference titled ‘Historical Threads: New Perspectives on Textile History and Material Culture’ held in November 2022, celebrating the development of a major new gallery Cottonopolis at the Science and Industry Museum. The conference drew on globalisation, Manchester’s role in the design and production of fabrics for world markets, the history of trade, PPE and contemporary textiles, featuring academics and researchers from University College London, Manchester, Brighton and Liverpool, alongside various artists, filmmakers and performers. Welcoming a keynote speech from Professor Prasannan Parthasarathi, Professor at Boston College, the conference sprang from our overarching ambition to foster conversations about how museum and archive collections and research can intersect with current scholarly debates.

The Ministry of Truth
From local entrepreneurs to educational charities, established authors and thinktanks, this year the Research & Public History team hosted a number of public debates, presentations and discussions in the Dana Library at South Kensington.

One of the most startling events was a talk by Silkie Carlo, Director of Big Brother Watch. Carlo discussed the findings of their ‘Ministry of Truth: the secretive government units spying on your speech’ report.

“Ministry of Truth” details the ways in which, under the guise of fighting the very real problems of disinformation, a wide range of MPs, academics, and journalists of government policy had their communications monitored and censored.

“It was a wonderful opportunity to collaborate with the Science Museum, as an institution that is loved and respected, and that I have looked up to since I was a child,” said Carlo. “I would like to see our collaborations with heritage institutions grow to share our important research with as wide an audience as possible and broaden access to our country’s great institutions.”

The report was particularly relevant to the Science Museum because of the evidence it collated that during the Covid-19 pandemic parts of Whitehall conflated scrutiny and criticism of lockdown modelling and vaccine passports with misinformation that must be suppressed.

“To have our research find a space to be discussed in such an important space was a privilege,” Carlo acknowledged, “and was particularly meaningful given the purpose of our work to educate the public on technology and human rights issues and advocate for strong rights protections.”


Links
Model of JAXA’s Hayabusa2 spacecraft, asteroid sample return talk held at the Dana Research Centre are open to SMG colleagues and the public alike, and we encourage people to see them as an opportunity to both learn more about and get involved in research across the Group. In July 2023, we were delighted to host Dinah Casar, co-founder of Qassim Mann and the Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry, as part of the public event of the AHRC-funded project Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration. Dinah delivered a talk on ‘Collections and Consequences’ and held a successful book signing event for her recently published book Closed on Mondays: Behind the Scenes at the Museum.

Jamie Bowman, production manager at the School of Advanced Study, London, remarked that “it was interesting to hear a personal account of the relationship between industry and museums, and thinking about an exhibition in relation to words such as ‘propaganda’.”

As well as benefitting the public, our research events aim to encourage staff to share transformative impact on their experience working for the Science Museum. The SMG Gender and Sexuality Network, an interdepartmental group dedicated to connecting colleagues interested in exploring issues and gender and sexuality in their work and the collections, held the first hybrid LGBT+ seminars across January and February 2023. This exciting series uncovered LGBT+ stories not only in the SMG collections, but in cultural institutions in the UK and beyond.

Participants engaged in conversation with scholars, community builders and SMG representatives as they showcased their work and spoke about the challenges faced both within and outside the museum walls.

In a similar vein, colleagues shared their collection-informed research and practice in front of a live audience at New Research Seminars in June 2023. Will Sims and Will Law drew from SMG archives and shared untold narratives of railway collection in its colonial context, while Dr Nathan Bosshard looked into SMG’s African collections, transferred from the Wellcome Trust, and shared his discoveries of re-engaging and reconnecting with researchers, visitors and African communities of origin. In the same series, students from SMG’s Collaborative Doctoral Programmes also gave presentations on an array of topics including participatory methods for Science and Technology collections and recovery of lost life and landscape of railway navies. The Research Seminar Series continues to thrive and we welcome colleagues’ contributions.

We always welcome students and external researchers to pitch event ideas to us. After all, events are integral to bring the SMG research community together and exchanging knowledge about the collections. If you would like to pitch an event, do not hesitate to share your ideas with: research@scienctemuseum.ac.uk.
PUTTING ON A SHOW WITH THE KENWOOD CHEF

ALICE NAYLOR
Collaborative Doctoral Student

RICHARD NICHOLLS
Assistant Editor

Congratulations to Alice Naylor, an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Partnership student with the Science Museum Group and the University of Portsmouth, who has won the Pamela Cox Social History Society’s Public History Prize for her research project ‘Putting on a show with the Kenwood Chef’.

Alice was inspired to re-create Kenwood product demonstrations when she discovered a script in the museum’s Kenwood holdings. She worked with university drama students to perform public demonstrations of the Kenwood Chef A701 in Havant (Hampshire) where the Kenwood factory is still located.

The prize recognises activities that generate public understanding of social and cultural history and the judging committee called this ‘a wonderful example of Kenwood history led by a chance archival encounter’. They were impressed by the initiative and enthusiasm Alice showed that made the events successful. They also commended the project for its focus on the social and cultural importance of everyday practices.

Alice Naylor:

My research looks at an innovative and technically integrated kitchen appliance – launched in 1950 – that is more familiar with, which was paying homage to the pop art aesthetics, the use of plastics, this shiny, new, exciting material, these shiny, new, exciting elements of the machine. The women were expected to know every single element of the machine. So, a lot of positive memories there about the use of it, but from the point of view of the woman who worked at the factory, were there any tensions behind the domestic bliss?

Alice Naylor:

The first was in Woking where it was the second home of Kenwood. Which is the second home of Kenwood. Which weighs so much you can barely walk away from it, and it does all the work while you’re doing other things.

Interview: Alice Naylor, what is the company going to do about it?

ALICE NAYLOR: I’m sure some listeners will be very familiar with the Kenwood Chef but Alice, we’ve heard a little bit about what it does, tell us what it looks like.

AV: There are two versions that are – I would hesitate to use the word iconic, but they are – ‘eye for design’. There’s the A700, which was launched in 1950 at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Show. It has this gorgeous cream, shiny appearance with chrome finish and elegant lines, and that was on the market for about ten years until 1961, when this was launched. British designer Sir Kenneth Grange came up with the model that most of us are more familiar with, which was paying homage to the pop art aesthetics, the use of plastics, this shiny, new, exciting material, these shiny, new, exciting elements of the machine.

Interviewer: Alice Naylor, what is the company doing about it?

ALICE NAYLOR: My research looks at an elegantly designed and technically integrated kitchen appliance – launched in 1950 – that is more familiar with, which was paying homage to the pop art aesthetics, the use of plastics, this shiny, new, exciting material, these shiny, new, exciting elements of the machine. The women were expected to know every single element of the machine. So, a lot of positive memories there about the use of it, but from the point of view of the woman who worked at the factory, were there any tensions behind the domestic bliss?

Alice Naylor:

What was the way that they did it. They understood how to make it look fantastic, new and exciting. I have been talking to an ex-ex demonstrator manager who did some fascinating things about how the women were dressed, certainly in the 1980s. Their uniforms were designed by British Airways; they had these very, very elegant uniforms, and they looked as if they knew what they were doing. They would stand behind a table with the Chef in front of them, and it was almost like choreography. There was this click of the machine and the whirring of the beaters, and the women would demonstrate recipes: they made lemonade, which included a whole egg, and it would fizz and buzz and hum. People were excited by this performance and, of course, you have to remember that in a department store, there would have been lights and an audience. You can imagine these women almost jostling each other to look ahead and see what the demonstrator was doing – you can imagine them nudging their husband in the ribs and saying ‘let’s try your chequebook out’. One of the lovely things that we have from the Science Museum archives in this script, which the demonstrators were using in, the late 1940s, early 1950s. There was this page scripted with very, very detailed instructions about how you demonstrate the drink mixer, the silver shovel, and little things like this.

Interview: And how do they find the demonstrators? Where are they recruiting from?

ALICE NAYLOR: They put adverts in newspapers, there was a training school at Kenwood where they would be trained for a couple of weeks to understand every single element of the machine. The women were expected to know the technical details as well, which is quite counter to a lot of the narrative, and the rhetoric at the time in advertising is that women don’t understand technical stuff. So, let’s make it look pretty. But, in fact, these demonstrators were trained to really understand the technology behind it, talking about the horsepower of the motor, and the variable speeds and the centrifugal action. It is so fun to see what they were expected to talk about, and it was all the real thing.

Interview: Is that partly about trying to appeal to the husband who has to ‘get his chequebook out’?

ALICE NAYLOR: I think a large part of the way that they were demonstrating and advertised particularly from the 1980s onwards was appealing to men with an eye for design. Kenneth Wood understood that if you were going to appeal to consumers to buy an expensive item, it made sense to appeal to the entire household, including the husband who was more likely than not to have the financial wherewithal to purchase such an item. And a lot of the advertising talked about his eye for design, the woman not understanding the technical aspect. It was so beautiful to look at that you had to have a Kenwood Chef or indeed a Kenwood kitchen.

Interview: Does it make you a better cook do you think?

ALICE NAYLOR: That is a question I ask often and ask the people that I am speaking to as part of my research. I think it made you look like a special cook. If you walked into someone’s home and you saw that Kenwood Chef on the kitchen counter, which weighs so much you can barely lift it. There was a conceit behind that. Sir Kenneth Grange, who designed the 1960 version (the A701) is quite explicit about saying it was over-engineered, and it was meant to be heavy because people place value on something that is heavy. So, it gives an object another kind of meaning – it has weight, it has heft.

So, if you walked into your neighbour’s home and saw that she had a Kenwood Chef, you’d think well, she’s special, she’s a special cook, and it made cakes lighter and it made meringues more fluffy. And, of course, you could multi-task because you can just turn the machine on and walk away from it. And it does all the work while you’re doing other things.

Interview: But is that the impression that I’ve got so far? I mean, Kenneth Wood was a very affable employer and people at the factory were well looked after. It was such an enormous presence, and it is an enormous presence in Havant, so whole families were employed there – husbands, wives and children worked in every element of the production line, on the design teams, in the offices, behind the scenes. Somebody who, in fact, spoke to this morning, was saying what an impact it had made on the local community, which is why I’m really pleased that it is at the spring Arts and Heritage Centre in Havant, which is the second home of Kenwood. The first was in Woking where it was founded in 1847, but it has had a strong presence in both those communities.

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REFLECTIONS FROM A CDP RESEARCHER

CIARAN JOHNSON
Volunteering Assistant and former CDP Researcher

I completed my PhD in June 2023 with the National Railway Museum’s (NRM) Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP). My research explored the industrial and post-industrial development of the Dartmoor landscape, focusing on the Princetown Railway, its associated granite industry, and the surrounding communities. In contrast to traditional railway histories which tend to be quite narrow in their focus, my PhD employed an enviro-technical approach, where environmental history, science and technology studies and social history meet. I also looked at the repurposing of the railway as a footpath after it closed in the 1950s. Covering 1800 to the 1960s, my research revealed how the railway and quarry developments were shaped by social, economic and political events, and explored the wider influence of the moor itself on nation-building and national identity.

My research saw me undertake several archival and field trips to the south-west, but for the majority of the time I was based at the National Railway Museum in York. With the support of the Collaborative Doctoral Partnership (CDP) Student Development Fund placement, during 2022 I was able to undertake a placement with the museum’s Conservation department, working alongside a team of Conservators and Conservation department, working alongside a team of Conservators and Conservation, preparing Queen Elizabeth’s former carriage for the Royals on Rails exhibition, held to mark the platinum jubilee.

As a writer, I am interested in the intersections of fact and fiction, particularly where history can be disrupted or reimagined and writing can shed new light on established ideas. The evolving theories and advancements in Medicine have fascinated me since I was a child – especially objects where science and the supernatural seem to cross over, for example the eerie bird-shaped masks of 16th century plague doctors. I wanted to find an organisation which would give me access to a vast collection surrounding medical history and also allow me to gain an understanding of museum curation, a role I would like to pursue. Medicine: The Wellcome Galleries was perfect, with one of the most significant medical collections in the world, including the Dana Research Centre and Library.

Through my exploration of the collection, I found very few objects relating to the experience and treatment of perimenopause and menopause. The Medicine team is already taking steps to widen the collection, but the lack of historical information on these experiences makes this a slow process. Menopause affects over 13 million people in the UK, yet the majority of museums and archives in the UK barely mention it. It is an experience often had in private, and negative stereotypes and beliefs only further bury these stories. The written or physical histories that do exist are often unsettling – from women accused of witchcraft for exhibiting symptoms, to Victorian women writing letters afraid that their blood would completely ‘dry up’, they begin to reveal a long history of misinformation.

My play explores the history of menopause through five women from different time periods, who meet and share their experiences. The women range from 1960s America to medieval England, and to the immortal ‘Crone’, a celestial being who reimagines the malicious older woman present in many folk stories. The play also functions as a tool, so each line that refers to a real historical or modern object can be ‘searched’ in the appendix, much like Collections Online can be.

The Wellcome Galleries is an experience often had in private, and negative stereotypes and beliefs only further bury these stories. The written or physical histories that do exist are often unsettling – from women accused of witchcraft for exhibiting symptoms, to Victorian women writing letters afraid that their blood would completely ‘dry up’, they begin to reveal a long history of misinformation.

In my residency, I have had the opportunity to conduct new content to engage visitors. The CDP gave me a wide-ranging experience in a heritage organisation, experience which has not only allowed me to develop my own skills, but which has since enabled me to help others in developing theirs.
Currently one of my main research interests is sustainable materials and, more specifically, plastics and synthetic fibres. This grew from my experience as a senior curator of materials science at the Science Museum, and has built on one of my specialisms: the history and preservation of plastics and modern materials. This background enabled me to take a long view, looking back at work accomplished on various projects in which I was involved: as lead curator on the Challenge of Materials gallery (opened 1997) and the 2007 Plasticity exhibition; Project Director for the Rubbish Collection exhibition (2014); acquisition of, and research into, early 20th century viscose items for the Science Museum (augmenting other important holdings).

I developed research undertaken for an article on ‘plastics and social responsibility’ published in 2020, in a book called Provocative Plastics. I became intrigued with the modern use of cellulosic fibres, as well as other plant-based biopolymers, for sustainable applications. It has been thought-provoking to consider the increasing pressures to produce more sustainable polymers for short-term use for single service applications as well as for long-term use.

My research has gone down interesting avenues, particularly that of the so-called vegan leather, many types of which are currently made of at least fifty per cent oil-based plastics, such as polyurethane and PVC. Quite an eye-opener. When giving presentations on sustainable polymers, my reflections alluded to previous work completed acquiring objects for the Plastics and Modern Materials collection at the Science Museum, for example that of Biopol, initially a commercial failure, but now a useful material for single-use, biodegradable products, and TENCEL™ – now such a staple of the fashion industry.

2022–23 was a busy year for me as an interim head collection at The Petrie Museum, UCL, dealing with archaeology and related archaeological materials. This was a return to another specialist area, My interests in polymer science and plastics continued: chairing The Plastics Historical Society; organising related seminars, some of which had sustainable themes; continuing as curatorial advisor to the Museum of Design in Plastics, Arts University Bournemouth; becoming an advisor for The Plastics Metamorphoses Project funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology in Portugal from March 2023. The latter project focuses on polymers, their history and development in Portugal, conservation and sustainability.

Lectures included speaking at the ‘Festival of Plastics’ day conference at the Museum of London (December 2022); panelist at the Portsmouth ‘Plastics Future 23’ (June 23); talks about the long-term sustainability of plastics at day conferences in Portugal (Metamorphoses Project) (July 23) and Imperial College, London (Science and Engineering for Cultural Heritage Conservation) (September 23).

A major highlight in 2023 was being invited to be a member of the board of examiners in Lisbon for a PhD on cellulose nitrate, its development and conservation, with particular emphasis on the related Portuguese industry.
For me, this year has seen five years of part-time PhD study draw to a close. The intensity of preparing for thesis submission and examination is a memory gradually receding, and I’ve been able to embrace the simple pleasure of free weekends without being shackled to my desk. While my working weeks have reverted to being fully occupied with the demands of delivering a forthcoming gallery, in the background I’ve been reflecting on what I’ve learned and on what the future might hold.

I’d wanted to undertake a PhD ever since first experiencing the ‘research itch’ as an undergraduate historian of science, feeling the thrill of discovery as I pored over Michael Faraday’s notebooks in the Royal Institution’s archives. It took a while for the circumstances to align, and for me to be able to combine my role as a curator with the pursuit of a doctorate. When they did it was a valuable opportunity not only to develop my fundamental research skills, but to justify time spent reading widely, thinking deeply, and attempting to find my unique voice. Crucial too has been the building of confidence in my developing specialisms; my roles as a museum professional have required me to move between a focus on fieldwork, research skills, and attempting to find my unique voice and personal research interest. This has been a challenging and demanding process, but to justify time spent on the PhD project I believe it has allowed me to develop a clear sense of what I want to do as a professional and as a researcher.

These aren’t only matters of personal development, but have – I believe – also enhanced my curatorial practice. My project examined aspects of the Science Museum’s Geophysics collection, and has enriched my ability to champion my existing collections and new acquisitions. I am excited about the potential to draw different kinds of connections, to embed these objects within a broader range of narratives, and to seek opportunities for them to inspire academics and visitors in new ways. Furthermore, there is nothing more effective for fostering a long view of the museum and its purpose than spending time in the corporate records, in the company of curatorial predecessors from decades past. It provides a valuable sense of perspective, and a reminder of how often problems that feel urgent and contemporary are reconfigurations of older debates.

On a practical level, first-hand experience of the challenges of using objects for historical research – even with the privileged access of an insider – has given me an appreciation of the barriers faced by external researchers. With our National Collections Centre due to reopen imminently, I’m hopeful that I can use my experiences to help ease those of others.

So what next? I’m looking ahead to further opportunities to develop as a researcher, in which I hope to be able to combine historical research with my interests and experience in the role of museums in addressing climate change. In the end, I hope to produce work not only interesting on its own terms, but also able to effect change. Wherever my research journey may lead next, this will be an important guiding principle.

LEFT: Accessing the collections as a researcher rather than as a curator has been really illuminating, and has helped me to appreciate some of the challenges external researchers face when wanting to use the collections as primary sources.
OUR STUDENTS

Current Collaborative Doctoral Award and Collaborative Doctoral Partnership students

SCIENCE MUSEUM
MARY CLAYTON-KASTENHOLZ
The Department of Science and Art revisited: the South Kensington Museum, 1830–1909
University College London, V&A and the Warburg Institute

ROSANNA EVANS
Instrumental learning? Object lessons in recapturing past science teaching
University of Leeds

DOROTHEA FOX
Curating climate change: collecting and displaying ecological crisis in UK museums
University of East Anglia

OSNAT KATZ
From London to Mars, and back to London: people, objects and the history of UK space science
University College London

REBECCA KEARNEY
‘False teeth for the masses’: Artificial teeth as technologies, prostheses and commodities in Britain, 1848–1948
University of Kent

NATIONAL SCIENCE AND MEDIA MUSEUM
ELENA KTORI
Oram and the deconstruction of sound: the philosophy and aesthetics of British post-war electronic music
University College London

ANÄIS WALSDORF
Metallic Empire: Science, Energy, and Industrial Imperialism in the John Percy Collection, 1877–89
University of Warwick

RHIANNON LEWIS
Digihised collections and the social museum: the (re)use of images of objects in the collections of the Science Museum Group
School of Advanced Study

ALICE NAYLOR
‘Eye appeal is buy appeal’: The design, mediation and consumption of Kenwood’s kitchen appliances, 1947–2020
University of Portsmouth

JAYNE KNIGHT
A Museum within the Museum: the Kodak Collection at National Science and Media Museum
University of Brighton

FRANCESCA STROBINO
Investigating Talbot’s experiments in photomechanical printing
De Montfort University

CATHERINE LUCAS
Nineteenth-century science and the history of sonic possibility
University College London

SOLVIG CHOI
Inside-out and outside-in: Participatory Methods for Science and Technology Collections
University of Leeds

NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM
ELIZABETH ADAMS
Literary cultures, social networks and the railway worker, 1840–1920
University of Strathclyde

REBECCA DERINE
Where are the Women of Colour? Addressing Gaps and Silences in Science and Industry Museum Collections
University of Leeds

JOHANNA RUSTLER
Britain’s railways in the Great War, 1914–1918
University of Aberdeen

CHLOE SHIELDS
Eating on the go: cultures of consumption and the railway in Britain, 1840–1940
University of Strathclyde

ABOVE: Percy Collection specimens at the NCC including steel, silver and copper samples

BELOW: Following the traces of history on the storeroom shelves of the National Science and Media Museum. Solvig Choi – PhD student Entangled Apparatuses: People, Cameras, Mountains

SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY MUSEUM
ALEXANDER APPLETON
‘Manchester Goods’: trading a global commodity
University of Leeds

CHRISTINA BUCKINGHAM
Methodologies of Play: digital interpretation as an agent for conversational STEM engagement
University of Salford

BETHANY TURNER-PEMBERTON
Technically Fabric: innovation in textile practice and design in 20th–21st century Manchester
Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University

LEENA LINDELL
Between Worlds: Kenneth Cantlie and locomotive engineering in Africa, the Americas and Asia
University of York

WILL LAW
Decolonizing the Master’s Gift: British Rail, decolonisation, and the International Market 1948–1991
University of Southampton

PETER RANDALL
The “Wandering Tribes”: Recovering the Lost Lives and Landscapes of the Railway Navvies
University of York

SURYA BOWYER
Collecting the boundaries of art in the Science Museum Group
Birkbeck, University of London
OUR TEAM

TIM BOON
Head of Research & Public History / Principle Investigator, Congruence Engine

Scott Anthony is Deputy Head of Research & Public History for the Science Museum Group. He is also a historian of propaganda, public relations and cultural diplomacy who received his DPhil from the University of Oxford. He has taught at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore (where he created the first Public and Applied history programme in Southeast Asia), as well as the universities of Cambridge, Manchester and Warwick.

He has worked as a Strategic Communications Consultant to the UK government and as a journalist contributing to media including most recently the BBC, Times Higher, London Review of Books Blog, Air Mail and The Spectator. He has won major grants and fellowships in Africa, Asia and North America. He has acted as researcher, consultant, and curator with institutions including the British Telecom Heritage, the Postal Museum & Archive, British Airways Heritage, and the British Film Institute. His books include The Story of Propaganda Film (2023), Shell: Art and Advertising (2021) and Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain (2012).

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KATE STEINER
Editor, Science Museum Group Journal

Kate is the Editor-in-Chief of the Science Museum Group Journal, the scholarly, open-access, online journal published by the Science Museum Group, which presents peer-reviewed articles from staff and external authors on topics of interest to science museums. Kate supports internal staff to develop writing and publishing skills as well as editing external submissions through to publication in two Journal issues per year. Forthcoming projects include an updating of the Journal’s design and architecture so that it works even better for readers and authors. Kate has degrees in both history and psychology and has worked in museums for over twenty years as a Learning Officer, an Exhibition Developer and as Head of Audience Research. Her publications include H. Robinson, A and Clipson, H, 2015, ‘Highlighting the value of evidence-based evaluation: pushing back on demands for “impact”’, JCOM: Journal of Science Communication (Vol 14, Issue 1).

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RICHARD NICHOLLS
Assistant Editor, Science Museum Group Journal

Richard is the Assistant Editor of the Science Museum Group Journal, an online publication which presents the global research community with peer-reviewed papers relevant to the wide-ranging work of the Group. Richard has helped oversee the development of the Journal from its inception in 2014 through to the present day, and is chiefly concerned with the Journal’s back-end functionality and editorial design. The Journal continues to enjoy a steady increase in readership numbers and contributions, and Richard is currently involved in a redevelopment of the Journal website and expansion of research outputs. He is also responsible for supporting internal staff to develop writing and publishing skills, as well as editing external submissions through to publication. Richard comes from a background in science journalism and science consultancy.

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VICKI BLUD
Research Grants Manager

Vicki Blud is a Research Grants Manager based at the National Railway Museum and develops grant applications for research funding across the Science Museum Group. She gained her PhD from King’s College London and lectured in literature at King’s, Birkbeck, the University of Surrey and the University of York. She is also a commissioning editor for Amsterdam University Press and a series editor at University of Wales Press. Her own research centres on histories of gender and sexuality, transgressive speech, monstrosity, animality, studies of space and place, and intersections of the humanities and cognitive sciences, and her publications include The Unspeakable, Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Literature 1000-1400 (2017), Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds (2019) and Cognitive Sciences and Medieval Studies: An Introduction (2020).

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KATHLEEN WALKER-MEIKLE
Research Grants Manager

As Research Grants Manager for the Science Museum Group, Kathleen is responsible for the development and management of all grant-based research at Science Museum Group’s five national museum sites. Kathleen is also a historian of medicine and science and received her PhD from University College London. She has published various articles and a monograph (Medieval Pets, Boydell & Brewer, 2012 – the first study of companion animals in the medieval period) along with popular history books on animals. Her research focuses on premodern medicine, natural history and animal-human relationships, including medieval toxicology and animals bites (the focus of a Wellcome Trust Fellowship Grant, University of York); translations of medical and natural history texts from Arabic to Latin in the medieval period, premodern pharmacology, late medieval magic and cosmology (University College London), early modern ageing, skin disease and animal diseases and skin (King’s College London, Renaissance Skin project). She is currently working on a project examining premodern zoonotic disease, including rabies, plague, scabies and leprosy.

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OUR TEAM

SCOTT ANTHONY
Deputy Head of Research & Public History & Project lead MaILHoC

Scott Anthony is Deputy Head of Research & Public History for the Science Museum Group. He is also a historian of propaganda, public relations and cultural diplomacy who received his DPhil from the University of Oxford. He has taught at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore (where he created the first Public and Applied history programme in Southeast Asia), as well as the universities of Cambridge, Manchester and Warwick.

He has worked as a Strategic Communications Consultant to the UK government and as a journalist contributing to media including most recently the BBC, Times Higher, London Review of Books Blog, Air Mail and The Spectator. He has won major grants and fellowships in Africa, Asia and North America. He has acted as researcher, consultant, and curator with institutions including the British Telecom Heritage, the Postal Museum & Archive, British Airways Heritage, and the British Film Institute. His books include The Story of Propaganda Film (2023), Shell: Art and Advertising (2021) and Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain (2012).

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OUR TEAM

CAROL CHUNG
Research Support Officer
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Carol is responsible for developing budgets for research grant applications and managing post-award project finance and reporting. She is the key contact for the research events programme, liaising with external and internal stakeholders to deliver research events. Carol also works with students, fellows and associates, and Research Department colleagues to ensure the smooth running of the department. Carol is a UCL-trained museum researcher specialising in audience research and museum learning, and is experienced in managing international cultural projects and developing research in East Asian museum contexts. She has successfully delivered two AHRC-funded projects, including Time, Culture and Identity: the co-creation of heritage sites in Türkiye in the late 19th century as well as the role of museums as spaces of social care.

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As Research Administrator, Tara is responsible for coordinating events and communications across the department of Research & Public History, as well as supporting research students, fellows and colleagues in various projects. Also, she is an Engagement Fellow on the AHRC-funded research project Communicating Time and Culture: Championing a Global Perspective in the History of Science and Technology through Public Engagement, in which she produces cultural events and audience research at the Science Museum. Tara holds an MA in Archaeology from UCL where her thesis looked at epistemic injustice in the construction of heritage sites in Türkiye. She has also published research on Austrian archaeological excavations in Türkiye in the late 19th century as well as the role of museums as spaces of social care.

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TEJALA RAO
Research Support Officer

Tejala is a linguistic master’s graduate with a deep interest in history, culture and heritage. Currently, she is a Research Support Officer at the Horniman Museum and Gardens, where she assists the Community team in facilitating outreach workshops to connect with the local community to better understand how our refurbished galleries can address their needs. Aside from this, she has facilitated multiple public-facing programmes at the National Museum of Singapore and The Espalanade Co. Ltd. Furthermore, she has conducted administrative and research work on multiple projects relating to public history such as Nine Emperor Gods Festival and the Durga Puja Festival in Singapore. Tejala is a fluent speaker of Tamil and Hindi.

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LYDIA ACKRELL
Digital Research & Open Access Fellow

Lydia is a Public History graduate from Royal Holloway, University of London. Prior to joining the Science Museum Group, she successfully delivered projects for Reading Museum (oral history interviews, exhibition design and copywriting) and for Windsor & Royal Borough Museum (exhibition copywriting), as well as The Hockey Museum (oral histories). Lydia, who is of Anglo-Italian heritage, is passionate about bringing the past to life through innovation and people-centred projects, including digital, multi-sensory and interactive content curation and community work.

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EMILY REES
Postdoctoral Research Fellow (MaILHoC) & Open Access Consultant

As Research Manager, Emily is coordinating and teaching on the Curying Science and Technology MSc course for UCL students. Alongside this, she is leading the consultation, and producing a paper, on how SMG can best meet the ever-evolving Open Access requirements from UKRI through potential membership of the British Library’s shared repository scheme. In July 2023, she will begin the role of Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the MaILHoC project. Emily holds a PhD in Film and Television Studies from the University of Nottingham. She has published on the domestication of the television set, women in engineering in the 19th century and transnational collaborations between women engineers and scientists. Over the years, Emily has worked across various university and museum-based projects, with a strong focus on digital audience engagement and non-traditional academic outputs.

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HARRY PARKER
Postdoctoral Research Fellow (MaILHoC)

Harry Parker is a historian of modern Britain with broad interests in the histories of science, technology and culture. He has published (or is soon to publish) on the history of industrial filmmaking in the early 20th century, and on the practice of sociological surveying in the interwar era. The latter of these draws on his PhD research, which he is currently completing at the University of Cambridge. His thesis project, titled Popular autoethnography in Britain c. 1870–1940, examines a variety of amateur social surveying projects across the period, asking how the emergent disciplines of social anthropology, human geography, and sociology provided new tools with which people could understand themselves as cultural beings. From July, Harry will be joining the Science Museum to work as a Postdoctoral Research Assistant on the MaILHoC (Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration) project, where he will be researching historical relationships between science museums and their industrial patrons.

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OUR TEAM

STACY HACKNER
UCL STS Module Convenor & Research Fellow

Stacy is responsible for convening the module ‘Curating Science & Technology’, part of the UCL STS Science Communication masters. The module explores how museums function differently from universities in researching and interpreting history of science. Her background is in bioarchaeology, with primary research in Sudan and Cyprus. She has previously taught at undergraduate, masters’ and FE levels at UCL and Birkbeck, and developed public engagement programming for the three UCL Museums. She focuses her research output on public lecturing online and for organisations including PubhD, Skeptics in the Pub, Museums Showoff, and the Edinburgh Fringe.

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CATHERINE ELLIOTT
Research Fellow

Catherine studied at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits), later obtaining a Museum Studies MA from University College London and a PhD from the University of East Anglia. Her research focuses on Africa, with a regional specialism in Southern Africa, and she has worked with contemporary and historical African collections, including at the British Museum and as a freelancer. In her current role as Research Associate, Catherine will help organise a panel and/or workshop for an upcoming event that develops Dr Nathan Bossoh’s recommendations following his recent tenure as African Collections Research Curator. Catherine will also be working on research bids, with a view to carrying out a substantial project involving the African Collections.

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DAVID FRANCIS
Research Assistant (Time and Culture)

Dr David Francis is the Research Assistant on the project Communicating Time and Culture: Championing a Global Perspective in Science and Technology through Public Engagement (CTC), where he researches transcultural perspectives on time and material culture. David developed his interest in Chinese-British museological entanglements through the AHRC-Newton funded project Craft China: (Re)making ethnic minority heritage in China’s creative economy (2018 to 2020) and the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme’s: Dreams of Yellow - Documenting the making and performance of the Nuosu yellow oil-cloth umbrella (2023–24). Both projects explore how the revitalisation of heritage is used to remake Chinese ethnic minority identity in China’s creative economy. David also lectures on Heritage, Memory and Museums and the University of Kent and the Institute of Archaeology at University College London. He is also a maker, practitioner and evaluator in the field of interpretation having worked previously at the British Museum, the British Library, the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo and Chester Zoo. David holds a PhD from the Institute of Archaeology at UCL, which explores the dynamics between Museums, Narrative and Identity.

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For all the updates, events and news please visit our website at https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/our-work/research-public-history

Browse the archive and read the latest issue of the Science Museum Group Journal at journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk
Why Museum Research Matters

TIM BOON
Head of Research & Public History / Principle Investigator, Congruence Engine

I recently published a historical study of Frank Sherwood Taylor, the Science Museum’s director for five years from 1950. It might, on the face of things, seem rather antiquarian to write on such a subject, especially given that the museum is so strongly associated with the present and future of science, despite its extensive displays of historical things and themes. On the contrary, I would argue that the past is the ideal territory for playing-out alternative futures and presents, like counterfactual narratives of museum practice that show how, given a few different circumstances, we might conduct our curatorial trade differently.

Every generation of curator and display-maker does their work in relation to what has gone before. Whenever in museum history a new gallery succeeds an old one, it is because the replaced display is considered unsuited or inadequate to the contemporary scene. We think we make better exhibitions than our predecessors did, but then so did they. In this context, Sherwood Taylor’s example is instructive because he was ambitious to transform the museum, by recognising that the majority of visitors would want more vivid displays than the developmental sequences that had seemed so modern when the King opened the Exhibition Road building in 1928. Sherwood Taylor initiated the first audience research. He also wanted interdisciplinary displays arranged by historical period, rather than the collection-by-collection organisation then used for the entire museum (except for the Children’s and special exhibition galleries). But, like us, our 1950s predecessors had to contend with constrained finances, and with partners who held rather different ideas from them about the purpose of the displays.

And, why publish? After all, museum staff have often had a fascination with their forebears, but remarkably little of that interest has found its way into print. In the first place, publication demands exactitude; whatever one might understand of museum history at the outset, writing for publication requires moving along the axis from something like institutional myth and gossip to evidenced historical argumentation and explanation.

For a decade the Science Museum Group Journal has been keen to publish on museum practice and history in part to help our colleagues in the universities to understand the culture and concerns of heritage sector organisations when there is often a tendency to think of museums only as impact vectors for academic research. From this desire to enrol colleagues within the Academy, it follows that we should publish more widely than in our own journal. My paper appears in the British Journal for the History of Science, the journal of the British Society for the History of Science, the learned society of which both Sherwood Taylor and I have been president. It was that coincidence that provoked my study in the first place.

By publishing we hope both to write museums back into the public culture of science and to promote a more informed debate about how museums can be most effective as part of the ecology of modern research practice.

Read more: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007087423000237