

INCLUSIVE DISPLAYS AND INTERPRETATION: EXPLORING OUR COLONIAL HISTORY

1. Context

This paper reflects the Science Museum Group's determination to develop its curatorial practice to better serve our audiences by addressing gaps in the stories we tell in line with our value of being open for all. We need to continue to address untold stories and under-represented communities in many areas in contributing to an inclusive society, but the specific focus of this paper is how – through our museums, the collections we hold and the communities we work with – SMG has an important role to play in more fully exploring Britain's colonial past. In striving for inclusive narratives, we will be driven by the public service of scholarship, research, increasing the sum of knowledge and allowing our audiences to make their own judgements, and should avoid activist language.

Our focus will be on additions, not subtractions as we bring fresh urgency to existing good practice in some areas and challenge ourselves in others. We know there is great audience appetite for curation that explores previously over-looked aspects of our history. For example, the Science Museum's exhibition on Alan Turing, that both celebrated his vast scientific contribution and drew fresh public attention to his mistreatment as a gay man, was hugely popular across the full range of our audiences.

The history of museum collections, and the history of science, technology and industry, is intertwined with Britain's history of empire and colonialism. The galleries of our museums have developed over many decades, and in some cases represent the interpretative approaches, language and attitudes or societal norms of our predecessors. They often highlight issues of trade and empire but neglect to draw attention to the slavery and other forms of exploitation that underpinned it. They do not necessarily acknowledge where individuals or organisations may have been funded through the slave trade or who fostered racist

views. Equally there are issues within our collections, both in terms of objects we hold and the way they have been catalogued in the past.

In addressing these areas through our research and in our museums, our clear intent is to shed fresh light and tell richer stories. By acquiring new objects and collections, undertaking research, selecting objects for display and stories to tell, and reviewing existing displays we will look to reveal hitherto hidden histories and stories not yet told. We will do the same with our online content. We will seek to highlight the contribution of people from black and minority ethnic communities to science, technology, engineering and maths historically and today, and to make explicit the close dependency of some technological and industrial developments in the UK on the exploitation of black people through slavery.

In many of our more recent displays and exhibition development, curators have presented a more inclusive view of science, technology, engineering and maths, actively seeking out and highlighting fresh stories and voices, illustrating diverse histories and people within the gallery narratives and working with a broad group of individuals to achieve more representative displays. Examples include: the diversity of portraits commissioned for the Medicine Gallery; the displays on mobile phone infrastructure in the Cameroon in the Information Age Gallery; interpretation in NSMM's WonderLab, and in NRM's *Testing* exhibition. Whilst these are positive developments, the approach will require constant focus and review as part of our wider Open for All strategy and planning.

More challenging is the task of addressing historic displays not scheduled for wider reinterpretation, where there is further work needed to place people in their historical context. There is a balance to be struck between unquestioning celebration of renowned scientists and innovators and their vilification for having held views that may have been widely held at the time but would be unacceptable today. We need to guard against ahistorical language and judgements. As this paper illustrates, some displays urgently require reinterpretation to illustrate new perspectives and more nuanced and difficult narratives. But these need careful selection to have impact – to adopt this approach to every historic display would be impractical, unaffordable and, more importantly, would do our visitors a disservice; we are a group of science museums and, while social narratives are crucial to our interpretation, they should not dominate every display.

This work will be an ongoing process. As attitudes change, and as we change as an organisation and as individuals, we will need to regularly revisit the way we present our narratives and will need to devote resource to this activity.

2. Inspiring Futures – SMG’s Strategic Priorities

The Science Museum Group’s mission is to ignite curiosity, share authentic stories, be open for all, reveal wonder and think big. These values will guide our approach to content and collections in the way we pursue the Group’s [core priorities](#):

1. Grow science capital in individuals and society

Historically there are racial and ethnic inequalities in the teaching and practice of science and its history in the UK. By building a generous understanding of the science-related knowledge, attitudes, experiences and resources that an individual builds up through their life, we are able to show the many and complex ways that science is part of all our lives. This inclusive approach democratises science and its history, making it open and relevant to many, rather than an exclusive activity of just a few.

2. Grow our audiences and exceed their expectations

SMG connects audiences to our collections through our objects and stories, surpassing their expectations. Whether it is in our buildings or through our digital offer, events, programming and outreach, we create experiences that reflect an inclusive and diverse culture, encouraging our audiences’ sense of belonging.

3. Sustain and grow our world-class collection

We will ensure that our value of being “open for all” will permeate throughout our collections, as we develop our collection according to the priorities as set out in our SMG Collection Development Policy 2021-2026. There is a need for a deeper understanding of our institutional heritage, its links to Britain’s colonial legacy and the cultural meaning and context of our collections. As we develop our collections, we are committed to reflecting people’s different experiences of gender, disability and representing diverse social, economic and ethnic backgrounds.

We have already started to develop research, ways of working, and projects across SMG that demonstrate best practice in our galleries, exhibitions and collections research and development. But we recognise that this is a process, so this document focuses on immediate and practical priorities for action as we continue to evolve our approach. We also hope it will initiate discussion and ongoing reflection.

3. SMG Collection

The SMG Collection consists of material representing our scientific, technological and medical past and present. The origins of the collection lie in the science collections of the South Kensington Museum, founded in 1857, a period when the British Empire was still expanding and collecting, and the stories and objects to be valued were bound up in the mental world of that era. There is a need to understand our collections further, and we are keen to support research with relevant experts to highlight the role of the collection in the context of empire and colonialism, and the exploitation that is part of this history, and to start to question the new roles that these collections can play in the 21st century. These types of debates and discussion need thoughtful discussion – through workshops, conferences and informal meetings – and perhaps most importantly need us to work with a range of experts outside our teams.

There are particular areas where we believe this work should focus:

1. Overtly racist material and legacy cataloguing issues.

As highlighted above, some of our historic collections contain or promote racist views or ideologies; an example is 'Follitt's Black Lectures', a series of prints. We need to undertake a review of such material to ensure it is given due context and interpretation in our database and is potentially removed from Collections Online. Some objects have been catalogued using terminology that would now be considered at best inappropriate and at worst offensive. We will address such legacy issues with cataloguing, including a review of people records. Some people (such as De La Beche) are listed with mentions of links to slavery but without any context. Other people records (such as that of James Watt) neglect to mention relevant links.

2. Objects or key narratives that relate strongly to enslavement, indenture or the abuse of other humans.

This category includes our ship models collection, material relating to the funding of early railways, some of our steam engines utilised in plantations, the growth and early development of the cotton textile industry and specific collections, such as photographs of [colonial Indigo production in India](#). Again, we will review these collections, undertake additional research and revise our interpretation.

3. Culturally Sensitive Objects.

We have already started to look at culturally sensitive objects within the Wellcome Collection, parts of which we hold. We plan to develop this research, ensuring an equitable recognition of and respect for source community expertise, and identifying the interests of source and descendant communities in the

collections. This work will take place over the coming three years. We will continue to work with Wellcome Collection to research the Ethnography, Folk and Asian Medicine collections.

4. Taking Action

Addressing these issues requires Group-wide commitment and resource as part of our Open for All programme of work. In addition, at each of our SMG museums there are specific displays, galleries and stories (on gallery and online) that need to be reviewed and updated. Some of these can be best tackled as part of planned gallery redevelopments, whilst others may require more urgent or focused attention. The action plan below sets out our intentions.

SMG ACTIONS	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Collections Development Policy addressing need for inclusive collecting and storytelling approved by Board of Trustees	X			
Review Advisory Boards for new galleries and exhibitions to ensure each has a diversity of voices	X			
Review SMG Research Strategy and Priorities (incl for Collaborative Doctoral Programme) and seek research funding to underpin more inclusive approaches to interpretation and address legacy issues with cataloguing	X	X	X	X
Invite external speakers with expertise in this area to speak at SMG lunchtime research seminar series	X	X	X	X
As part of Open for All recruitment, rigorous focus on recruiting more Black and minority ethnic curators, programmers and content developers	X	X	X	X
Curatorial gallery audits – involving front of house teams – at each museum to identify areas requiring review or intervention	X			

SCIENCE MUSEUM ACTIONS	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Continue and extend partnership with the Museum of Colour to inform our thinking	x			
Review interpretation of priority displays to tackle: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Slave whips' and 'Man catcher' in Making of Modern World • James Watt references in East Hall • Science City references to empire and enslavement 	x			
Further research objects displayed in East Hall and Making of the Modern World to place Industrial Revolution in wider historical context, specifically drawing out e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any objects utilised on cotton, sugar and tobacco plantations related to the slave trade 		x	x	
Review Space Gallery interpretation of African American astronauts and include non-Western technological innovation, review impact of rocket launches on indigenous communities	x			
Review potential for further research on the implications of empire and trade in Science City Gallery		x		
As part of refresh of <i>Who am I?</i> Gallery, prioritise section on genetics	x	x		

SCIENCE AND INDUSTRY MUSEUM ACTIONS	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Revise Textiles Gallery demonstrations to make explicit the dependence of the cotton industry on slavery. Test and develop with partners	X			
As part of Revolution Manchester Gallery refresh, research and include more diverse stories and images, review interpretation of individuals mentioned such as Joseph Whitworth		X		
As part of redisplay of Power Hall, work with partners to ensure a diversity of people represented, set engines and engineering in global context, use objects such as Pakistani and South African Railway locomotives to illustrate colonial contexts	X	X	X	
As part of <i>Revolutionary Railroad</i> gallery development, illustrate the fact that key investors in the Liverpool-Manchester Railway (Charles Lawrence, John Moss, Robert Gladstone) sunk compensation funds from slave ownership into construction of railway			X	X
In researching and planning for future galleries <i>Cottonopolis</i> and <i>City of Ideas</i> , work with academic and community partners to ensure we set regional narratives in a global context and represent a diversity of people and viewpoints	X	X	X	X
Support collaborative PhD 'Manchester Goods' to set the cotton industry within global political and economic context; pilot research with University of Manchester on transatlantic slave trade	X	X	X	
Ensure all planned exhibitions include a diversity of voices, representation	X	X	X	X

NATIONAL RAILWAY MUSEUM AND LOCOMOTION ACTIONS	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
<p>The curatorial vision for our Vision 2025 redevelopment aims to use our collections and programmes of research to uncover previously hidden stories of how railways transformed the world in which we live. As part of this process revisit and reassess the well-known subjects of railway history, challenging assumptions and exploring new angles to reveal hitherto untold or neglected stories, including those that are global and multicultural</p>	X	X	X	X
<p>Through Vision 2025 the refreshed Great Hall will include stories of imperial expansion, the development of colonial trade networks and the building of an informal ‘empire of capital’ through the financing of railways around the world, including the fact that some of the financial backers and directors of early railways were involved with the slave trade.</p> <p>We are currently investigating a joint research project with the University of York to create a detailed programme of research into this specific area</p>	X	X	X	X
<p>Empire and its legacies in post-colonial trading links are recurring themes in parts of the current NRM collections and displays too. However, there is little interpretation that addresses the railways’ role in empire, despite there being significant numbers of objects which speak to this theme. We will redress this, particularly in the museum’s Great Hall.</p> <p>Specific examples include:</p> <p>The 1896 Cape Government Railway locomotive which represents a range of stories from Britain’s imperial project to the post-colonial world, many of which are challenging as they touch on the exploitation of southern and eastern Africa’s people and natural resources.</p> <p>Similarly, the KF17 locomotive, built in Britain in 1935 for the Guangzhou – Hankou railway but paid for by reparations from the Boxer Indemnity fund, can speak to many of the key events of 20th century Chinese history. This locomotive, its designer,</p>	X	X	X	X

<p>Colonel Kenneth Cantlie, and his close personal ties to Sun Yat-Sen, first President of the Chinese Republic, forms part of a collaborative doctoral research project with the University of York due to begin in autumn 2020, a project that will draw heavily on Cantlie’s extensive and important, but currently little known, archive held at the NRM.</p> <p>The empire is also strongly reflected in the NRM’s model collection, e.g. a ¼ scale model of a Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway locomotive of 1856 exhibited in the Great Hall but once displayed in the company’s London boardroom, and in models of Indian railway carriages. Interpretation of these models does not currently reflect in any detail their connections with empire or the role of the railway in helping strengthen British colonial rule in India – this will be redressed as part of the Great Hall refresh</p>				
<p>Review terminology in interpretation of Open Store labelling, and interpretation of First World War ambulance train, which includes a contemporary personal account with a racist epithet</p>	X			
<p>In our refreshed Station Hall and Great Hall galleries we will research and tell stories of the impact of immigration on railway employment and the wider social and economic life of post-war Britain, including the role of British Railways in actively recruiting for new employees in Barbados where they set up a recruiting office in the 1950s. BR also recruited extensively amongst the ‘Windrush Generation’ who came to the UK from the 1940s onwards but unofficial ‘colour bars’ also existed at various locations on the railway at this time, an important factor in the passing of the Race Relations Act of 1968 which made discrimination in employment on grounds of race and nationality in the UK illegal</p>	X	X	X	X
<p>Investigate what other currently ‘hidden’ stories we should look to tell, e.g. what history is there, for example, of black workers – male and female - on Britain’s railways before the arrival of the ‘Empire Windrush’ in 1948?</p>	X	X		
<p>Build on previous oral history work relating to (a) the Uganda Railway and the role of indentured</p>		X	X	X

labourers from India in operating the line and (b) the training of Sierra Leonean railway mangers in the UK in the 1950s and 1960s				
Following the example of our exhibition on Testing (2018-19) ensure that BAME representation in temporary exhibitions, our redeveloped galleries and proposed 'Railway Futures' exhibition space (part of the NRM's new Central Hall currently in development) are reflected in those spaces where appropriate	x	x	x	x

NATIONAL SCIENCE AND MEDIA MUSEUM ACTIONS	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24
Redisplay a section of Kodak Gallery: Photography studio set up to include content of Bell Vue Studio and South Asian migrants to Bradford	X			
Sound & Vision galleries present the greatest opportunity to address two permanent galleries. The research and develop of content will ensure a diversity of voices and stories is represented, specifically (but not exclusively) by working with local Bradford communities			X Funding depend ent	X Funding depende nt
Sound & Vision stories in development include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Photographic silver story: exploring early photog practices and stories of colonial trade routes, lives of mining communities and contemporary parallels • Prisoners chair story: will address problematic histories of anthropometry, including colonial photography • Colour revealed: exploring colour calibration based on white skin, algorithmic bias of facial recognition software • New acquisitions of BAME artists and practitioners such as Juliana Kasumu's photography 		X	X	X
Build on the participatory work undertaken through Bradford's National Museum research project to embed community practice and collaborative work. Use the Ideas Hub to engage with visitors on gallery	X	X	X	
Select new photographs and video for café presentation, featuring images from the collection that feature a diversity of people, including communities and places in Bradford	X			
Develop funded research projects and collaborations around structural injustice in collections e.g. a citizen science project working with volunteers to address culturally sensitive image and object collections	X	X	X	X

APPENDIX

Light touch reviews already undertaken: no immediate action required:

Science Museum: Medicine Galleries, Information Age and Mathematics galleries, specifically interpretation of:

- Galton whistle and phrenology
- Marie Stopes 'Pro Race' contraceptive cap
- 'Racial' brand of cervical cap
- Karl Pearson's booklet on eugenics
- Leeuwenhoek's simple microscope
- James Watson's DNA model
- Alexander Graham Bell interpretation
- Galton display
- Cabinet of foreign weights
- Histology slides from South African asbestos mine

National Railway Museum, specifically interpretation of:

- Nameplates (e.g. Hindostan, Straits Settlements, Gladstone, Harewood House, Winston Churchill)