

Newsletter

The Friends get out and about again!

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AGM 23 September 2023

It was wonderful to see so many of you at the AGM in September. As well as the trustees and one of our Patrons, Sir George White, there were 53 Friends (the most I can remember in recent years) and five members of staff. We started with the formal business of the AGM, including agreeing to the changes to our constitution that were advertised in our last newsletter, and then had some interesting short talks from the museum team. There was a real buzz in the room over tea and cake afterwards, and somehow Mary Bailey and her helpers managed to stretch the supplies to satisfy far greater numbers than we had expected.

New volunteers still needed

I am continuing my appeal for more members to step up now to take an active part in running the organisation and ensure our continuing success for the foreseeable future.

Please think about whether you could do that. If you are not sure if that is something you would enjoy doing, please get in touch with me - sue.thurLOW@outlook.com – so we can perhaps meet for coffee and talk about the many different types of opportunities available, without there being any commitment on your part.

And thank you to the small number of members who have come forward to discuss possibilities, including those who have then decided it is not for them.

Bristol's Brilliant Archaeology festival

Once again Friends' volunteers contributed to the archaeology festival at Blaise in September. Our Historic Food Group set up a lovely display of historic food on a dairy theme – they were positioned just in front of the Model Dairy behind the museum – and helped visitors make butter using whisks made of bound bunches of twigs. I was taken with the delicious aroma of the bright green Roman garlic cheese but I

am not sure I would have been so keen on the taste as the ingredients list for about half a pound of cheese included two whole bulbs of garlic!

Margaret Bell

Many of you will already know the sad news that Margaret Bell died in the late summer. Margaret was a passionate member of the FOBAG (Friends of Bristol Art Gallery) committee for about 20 years and partnered her late husband Maurice in organising and going on every trip and holiday. She was a familiar and well-liked figure, so it was fitting that there was a good number of ex-FOBAG members at her funeral.

Newsletter Award Success – British Association of Friends of Museums

There was a strong contingent from Bristol at BAFM's 50th annual conference on Saturday 30th September and I am delighted to tell you that our lovely newsletter was awarded Joint Runner-up in the national Newsletter Awards. The BAFM judging panel particularly mentioned the beautifully-illustrated article in our December 2022 edition, 'New Acquisitions from Japan'. It describes the purchase – funded by the Friends – of more modern ceramics and associated artefacts by Amy Raphael, Curator of Applied Art, during a study trip to Japan, demonstrating our support for young curators in developing their careers.

The conference itself, held at the Doncaster Mansion House, featured some excellent speakers including Dr Dean Lomax, who will be delivering one of the museum's Winter Lectures, *Mary Anning and the Sea Dragons*, at M Shed and online on 8 February 2024.

In the three days leading up to the conference four of us from the Friends took the opportunity of joining a little South Yorkshire holiday organised by Chair of BAFM, Dan Calley. We went to several places that would not have been on my



▲ The Friends historic food display – featuring Roman garlic cheese – at Bristol's Brilliant Archaeology festival at Blaise
© Eve Andreski



◀ Inside the Doncaster Mansion House, the venue for the BAFM conference
© Sue Thurlow

Cover photo: Detail from Jacob Jordaens, 1593–1678, *The Nativity or The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c 1653. Oil on
© Bristol Culture



▲ **Octopus by Marialuisa Tadei** - hand-cut, coloured glass tiles over a concrete and steel structure – at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park
© Sue Thurlow

wish-list travelling alone, and of course they were all fascinating. A highlight was the Yorkshire Sculpture Park which wonderfully combined sometimes surprising modern and contemporary art with an invigorating walk through lovely parkland.

The Colston Statue

Since it was toppled in 2020 the Colston statue, on temporary display in M Shed or, as currently, in the stores, has been included in the daily Behind-the-Scenes tours. As one of the regular tour leaders I have found it a very interesting and enlightening experience to talk to visitors about the statue and be able to respond to their questions and comments. It has long been the museum's, and indeed the city's, intention to put the statue on permanent public display in one of the galleries, along with many of the stories and viewpoints associated with it – past, present and future. There is now a commitment to do that in March 2024. Of course, there will be significant costs involved in setting up the display, and I am pleased that the Friends committee members/trustees have agreed (although not quite unanimously) to provide some of the funding.

Sue Thurlow Chair

Making Waves:

Mary Anning and the Sea Dragon

From January 2024 Bristol Museum & Art Gallery will be putting back on permanent display a large partial fossil skull of a *Temnodontosaurus*, a type of ichthyosaur (an extinct marine reptile) found by Mary Anning in 1813 when she was 14 years of age.

To help mark Bristol Museums' bicentenary this important fossil is currently undergoing expert conservation and mounting by an external conservator before returning to the museum this December. This fossil has many stories to tell which will be explored in the new display. Alongside the fossil will be short films documenting various aspects of the project and a painted reconstruction of the *Temnodontosaurus* as it would have appeared in life in the Jurassic seas. The fossil will also benefit from a 3-D model reconstruction of the whole skull that will be used for outreach, public events and to help all our audiences experience this amazing sea dragon. Four films celebrating four outstanding women working in geoscience have also been commissioned. The focus of these films is to encourage young people, especially girls, to consider the geosciences as a possible career path. All the films will be available online as a learning resource.

The fossil skull will go back on display just as Bristol Museum welcomes a loan of the maquette produced by artist Denise Dutton for her statue of Mary Anning that is now installed in Mary's hometown of Lyme Regis. From 13 January to 30 April 2024 you can come face-to-face with this beautiful representation of Mary at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery. The maquette depicts Mary holding a fossil *Eoderoceras*, a type of ammonite that is commonly found at Lyme, and in the other hand her hammer. Our display will be enriched with beautiful images, documents and fossils that will help give Mary a voice, emphasising her links to the Bristol Institution. The maquette is on loan from Mary Anning Rocks! the charity that campaigned for Mary's statue to be put up in Lyme.

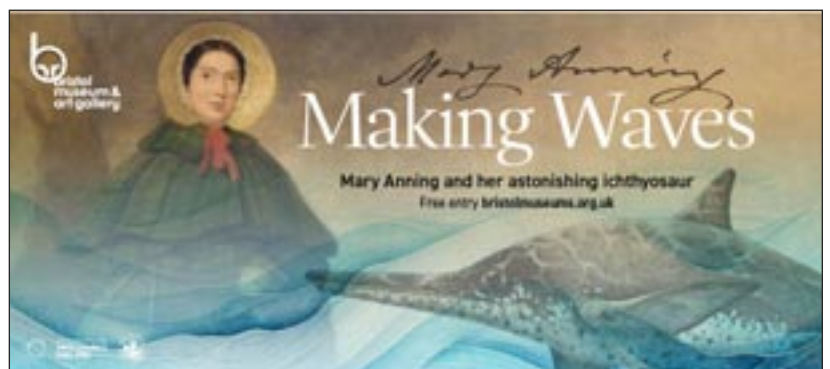
For families and younger audiences, we are working with some creative and talented people to bring to life the story of Mary and her sea dragon through performance. This exciting part of the project is starting to take shape and will take place for schools and families during the time we have the maquette on loan. We are grateful for the financial support of the Friends of Bristol Museum, Galleries & Archives which has made this part of the project possible.

Deborah Hutchinson Curator (Geology)



▲ **The fossil skull of marine reptile *Temnodontosaurus* being imaged by Jon Kent**
© Deborah Hutchinson

▼ **The Mary Anning display and activities will open at BMAG on 13th January**
© Bristol Museums



Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

Staff news

The Interim Head of Culture & Creative Industries, Dan Feeney, left the service in early September as his temporary contract came to an end. The team would like to extend thanks to Dan for his support during the previous seven months. The recruitment process to appoint a new permanent Head of Culture & Creative Industries has now started. We will keep you updated on this appointment.

We are delighted to announce that Karen MacDonald has been appointed to the Head of Public Engagement. Karen has been with the service for 11 years, most recently in the Public Programme Manager role. This completes the recruitment process for the new Senior Management Team (SMT). Recruitment will now start to fill Karen's previous role.

We have said goodbye to Steffan Le Prince, Digital Assistant, who left in September. We would like to thank him for his support during his time with us and wish him all the best in his next role.

Autumn Exhibitions Programme

On Wednesday 18 October we hosted our Autumn Exhibition Celebration Evening at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, a celebration of our autumn exhibitions and projects.

The Natural History Museum's hugely popular annual *Wildlife Photographer of the Year* returns to BMAG from M Shed for the first time since 2014. It is a favourite amongst our visitors and probably familiar to many of you. The exhibition celebrates the power of photography to advance scientific knowledge, spread awareness of important issues and nurture a global love for nature. It will run until 21 April 2024.

The *Concealed/ Reveal* exhibition, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Art Fund, has been produced with Curating for Change, who provide opportunities for

▼ **Felicity Sylvester, Exhibition Partnerships Manager, Natural History Museum speaking at the Autumn Exhibitions Celebration Evening**

© Bristol Culture



D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people seeking a curatorial career. This exhibition explores how disability can be a creative force and questions how these stories have been hidden and socially stigmatised.

An Introduction to Extinction Silences is a project we have been working on in collaboration with Rising Arts Agency, considering colonial silences in the museum's World Wildlife Gallery – from the animals as beings, to their colonial histories, Indigenous knowledge and significance to local communities. This project is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, delivered by the Museums Association. More of this project will be revealed over coming months.

The Autumn Exhibitions Celebration was a busy and vibrant evening. We welcomed almost 200 guests including Friends, Patrons, 1823 Club members, corporate sponsors and members, internal stakeholders, exhibition partners and collaborators, and peers from other cultural organisations. We also welcomed new guests who won tickets through our social media competition. We have received some lovely feedback from the event.

The Historic Houses

Blaise Museum, The Georgian House, and The Red Lodge are currently open on weekends only. We have made the decision to reduce the opening hours of these historic houses which will allow us to make savings on the running and, in particular, heating costs, of our museums. This will also mean we can ensure staff are placed where they are needed most.

The three houses will be closed from 18 December and will reopen on the weekends in the spring of 2024 with new activities and events for the year ahead.

Voices of the Georgian House

Until 17 December, we are displaying two new sets of artistic responses to the Museum's colonial past. If you have not yet visited we would encourage you to do so. You will encounter poems that reveal hidden stories and the imagined unheard voices of those that were enslaved, both in Nevis and in this house.

Voices of the Georgian House: the Tenth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbour's'

© Stephen Bradley,
Bristol Culture





▲ *Voices of the Georgian House: the Ninth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour'* © Barbara Evripidou



▲ *Professor Mike Benton delivers the October Winter Lecture at M shed*

© Deborah Hutchinson

These responses have been written by Akulah Agbami (a theatre maker, poet and writer studying a PhD at Bath Spa University); Aaron Ayiih (a former Ghanaian TV host and an English graduate with a master's degree in communication) and Cleo Lake (a poet, dancer and creative writer, Green Party councillor and former Lord Mayor of Bristol).

Winter Lectures

October saw the start of the Winter Lecture Series with an engaging talk delivered by Friend of the Museum, Professor Michael Benton, in which he explored mass extinctions and brought to life the deep past as never before. The in-person event was well attended and was accompanied by the sale of Professor Benton's new book *Extinctions: How Life Survives, Adapts and Evolves* – enabling guests to purchase a signed copy.

This was followed in November with Professor Marc Holderied who shared how moths use acoustic defences and why this can help us in our ever-noisier world. The Winter Lecture Series is once again made possible thanks to the generous sponsorship from the Friends of Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives. We appreciate your ongoing and valuable support.

Lund Sauceboat

Through the generous support of the Friends, we have acquired a rare sauceboat made at the Bristol porcelain factory of Benjamin Lund. The sauceboat had been on long-term loan to

Bristol Museum and is displayed alongside other examples of soft-paste porcelain in the Ceramics Gallery. This is a rare example signed 'Bristol', meaning that it can be confidently attributed to Lund's factory. The sauceboat joins another recent acquisition of two extraordinary vases by the same maker, also acquired with the support of the Friends. These acquisitions have allowed us to continue to grow and consolidate this essential part of our ceramics collection. Thank you to you all for enabling these valuable acquisitions and enriching this collection.

Caroline Booth Morris & Beth Cutter
(co-Development Managers)

▼ *The Lund sauceboat recently acquired thanks to the financial support of the Friends*

© Bristol Culture



Jacob Jordaens' 'The Nativity' from Antwerp to Bristol

A year ago, Jacob Jordaens' oil on panel Nativity painting returned to display in Bristol Museum & Art Gallery European Renaissance Gallery's (Gallery III) following a lengthy conservation project. In time for the festive season, the following article discusses this enigmatic panel painting, its fascinating creator, and connections to the city of Bristol.

Jacob Jordaens, 1593 – 1678

Jacob Jordaens was born in Antwerp in May 1593. He was the eldest of 11 children born to the wealthy linen merchant, Jacob Jordaens, and his wife Barbara von Wolschaten. Jacob the Younger had a good education. According to his major biographer, R.A. d'Hulst, he wrote good letters, spoke decent French, and had an in-depth understanding of classical mythology.

By 1607, at the age of 14, Jacob was apprenticed to Adam van Noort. A painter, draughtsman, and industrious teacher, Van Noort had over 35 apprentices, the best-known being Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Jordaens maintained a close working and personal relationship with Van Noort throughout his life. By 1615, Jordaens was admitted to the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke's and in 1616 he married van Noort's daughter, Catharina, who was nearly four years his senior. By 1621, Jordaens was taking on his own pupils and sat for a year as dean to the Guild.

What distinguishes Jordaens from the other well-known stars of the Flemish Baroque, such as Rubens and Anthony Van Dyck, (1599 – 1641), was his decision to remain in his hometown throughout his career. From his Antwerp studio, he assisted Rubens on some courtly commissions, contributing to compositions for Philip IV's hunting lodge in Madrid and the allegorical picture cycle painted for Marie de Medici's newly-constructed Palais du Luxembourg in Paris. Jordaens also had royal patrons of his own, most significantly Queen Christina of Sweden.

In the early 1640s Jordaens' two biggest rivals, Rubens, and Van Dyck, both died. His father-in-law and former painting master, Van Noort, had also died, leaving behind eight properties which were inherited by Jacob. This meant that by 1645, Jordaens was the pre-eminent Flemish painter and one of the wealthiest men in Antwerp.

Jordaens' later life was marked by his civic commissions, such as those for the Antwerp Town Hall, and his conversion to Calvinism from about 1650. Indeed, in 1658, he was ordered to pay a fine on account of his heretical Protestant writings. In October 1678 he died, as did his daughter Elizabeth, during an epidemic of the mysterious 'sweating sickness'.

The exuberance and technical quality of Jordaens' paintings, as well as his fascinating life and importance for the city of Antwerp, has secured his legacy as one of the masters of the Flemish Baroque.

The Nativity

Jordaens had painted this subject, the 'Nativity', or the 'Adoration of the Shepherds' at multiple points in his career. The earlier versions tend to be more intimate, domesticated scenes, focusing on the relationship between the Virgin and Christ Child. One can find particularly tender examples in the Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, and the National Museum of Stockholm.

By contrast, this version is dramatic and monumental. Jordaens has illustrated this iconic Christian scene with multiple figures, human, angelic and animal alike, all mesmerised by the new-born Christ child, who is ensconced within his mother's arms. The cherubim are painted with particular flair, illuminated by the divine light descending from the heavens.

This painting dates to the later stage of Jordaens' career when he boasted many commissions and multiple studio assistants. The interdisciplinary Jordaens Van Dyck Panel Painting Project (JVDPPP) has discovered fascinating details, invoking questions regarding this particular painting's function in Jordaens' studio. It is made from fifteen separate pieces of Baltic wood, the joints of which can be seen with X-ray photography. X-ray examination also reveals there is a scene of the Flight into Egypt beneath the Nativity composition, which Jordaens may have painted up to thirty years earlier.

Researchers believe Jordaens originally conceived the Nativity on a smaller scale. He then extended the original panel himself and added to the composition, subsequently using the picture as a studio example for prospective clients. This would certainly explain his reason for including multiple figures of diverse stature and expression, and the somewhat unfinished quality of the panel's peripheries.



In many ways, a mystery prevails, and further research must be undertaken to discern the exact nature of and reason for this picture's creation.

Bristol Connections

Since 1931 this elusive panel painting has been in the possession of Bristol Museums, though it has been in the city for much longer.

The painting first appeared in Bristol as part of the collection of Daniel Wade Acraman, (1775 – 1847). Acraman, a local industrialist and iron founder, had been a major patron of the fine arts in the city. Indeed, Samuel Taylor Coleridge went so far as to call him 'the Father of the Fine Arts in this city'. Acraman was also a founding member of Bristol Museum's forerunner, the Bristol Institution on Park Street, contributing significantly to the heyday of Bristol Institution Exhibitions of Pictures in the 1820s. Another Jordaens painting, *A Landscape with Bacchanalian Boys*, had been contributed to the Institution's first ever Exhibition of Pictures by Old Masters in 1824.

Following a failed business venture in the early 1840s, 200 years after Jordaens' prestige rose to the highest of heights in Antwerp, Acraman's iron founding business collapsed in Bristol. He was subsequently forced to sell his fine art collection in an 1842 Christie's & Mason sale from his home at Lower Crescent, Clifton.

This painting was sold on the third day of proceedings as lot 221, with the catalogue noting the panel as 'an admirable composition, richly coloured'. It was purchased by a Battersby, most likely W Battersby, and passed down by inheritance to John Battersby Harford, who in 1858 gave the painting to the Royal West of England Academy. In 1931 this fascinating picture was purchased by Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, where it has remained much loved ever since.

Please do visit this enigmatic picture in the Renaissance Gallery during the festive season. As well as enjoying the exuberance of the image you can see for yourself the points of connection between the peripheral and central oak panels and contemplate the history of this picture.

Emma Meehan Curatorial Trainee

▲ Jacob Jordaens, 1593 – 1678, *The Nativity or The Adoration of the Shepherds*, c. 1653
Oil on oak panel
© Bristol Culture

Southampton Art Gallery and Sea City Museum

Thursday 13 April 2023

This account of our trip is a composite of three different experiences – that of myself, Jane Wills, and Matthew Trapnell (my son). One cultural complex but, as can be expected, we had different interests, expectations and perspectives.

Jane Wills' experience

I really enjoyed visiting the civic building in Southampton, which was eye-catching and unusual in its 1930s style. In many ways it was a perfect venue for displaying items from the amazingly huge Southampton art collection and altogether there was far more to see than I had expected. I spent my time, by chance, discovering more of the history of Southampton, which has become such a significant British port, looking at the kind of work that goes on there. I thought the exhibition was well presented and, as someone with little knowledge of Southampton, I left with a lot more insight into the industries and history of the port. I had a very quick run round the *Titanic* exhibition, and I realised that it was worthy of an hour and a half's visit in its own right. It looks such fun and informative and I like the style they have adopted.

Hazel Trapnell's experience

We were spoiled for choice. There simply was not enough time to do everything. I was keen to see the art gallery and particularly the paintings by Stanley Spencer and Mark Gertler. However, we soon found these were not on display. I did, however, enjoy a wonderful painting by James Tissot. The displays are constantly changing, so do check before you go if there is something you particularly want to see. But I quickly began to appreciate the exhibitions which had taken their place – especially *Telling Tales*, the story of Narrative Art, a collection of paintings exploring the social history and historical events mainly of the Victorian age. In the same vein, I appreciated the striking black and white photos in *Found Cities, Lost Objects*. The photos gave poignant insights into the life of East Londoners.

Matthew Trapnell's experience

I was most taken by one of the rooms that featured a commemorative exhibition of the work of John Salt, who died a couple of years ago. He was at the forefront of the Photorealist movement, having moved to the USA on a scholarship in 1967, and pioneered painting in extraordinary detail, using airbrush techniques and stencils. Responding to the lure and detritus of American consumer culture, he became fascinated by the sight of derelict cars and rundown trailer parks, which became his subjects throughout his life. There was a delightful 15-minute video of him that ran on a loop, showing him working on one of his last pieces. By this stage, a couple of years before he died, he was slowing down, but it was remarkable to witness how he went about his work, so methodically, painting from photographs that he had taken himself. The paintings themselves had a Hopper-esque quality to them, a striking poignancy arising out of the decay and loneliness of abandoned cars and the trite trappings of a consumerist culture.

Hazel's and Matthew's experience

We were gripped by the *Titanic* exhibition in the Sea City Museum. It was very informative, and we were surprised by some of the vital statistics: the number of staff on the *Titanic* was about 900 with 750 from Southampton, and a mere 23 women, 20 of whom survived. They were there to serve the 1,500 passengers. A large wall-mounted wooden *Titanic* in 2-D revealed the varied cargo, victuals and mail bags, as small doors were opened. This was fascinating – not just for the children for whom it was perhaps designed. It was a very striking exhibition.

We all felt we had only touched the tip of the iceberg (sorry about the pun) and could return for longer to see some of the bits we realise now we had missed. Our thanks to Richard Avery for his humorous commentary and good organisation.

Compiled by Hazel Trapnell



▲ Three Thousand Species of Fungus in the New Forest, 2019. Kurt Jackson



▲ Auguste Rodin's Eve (Bronze)

Photos by Catherine Dixon and Hazel Trapnell

Concealed/Reveal Exhibition

Back in 2020, Bristol Museums, along with over 20 museums from across England, partnered with Screen South/Accentuate, a creative development agency, to take part in their pioneering Curating for Change programme.

Curating for Change provided groundbreaking opportunities for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people to work within the museum sector in paid curatorial roles. With funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, a series of tailored fellowships and traineeships were set up within the partner museums.

The COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020-2021 led to inevitable disruption, so it was not until 2022 that Bristol Culture recruited Curatorial Fellow Jo Barlow into the museums' History team on an 18-month contract. Jo was provided with mentorship and training in collections management and exhibition development, working with curators, conservators and designers.

As part of the ethos of the programme, Jo was encouraged not only to suggest ways for improvement at Bristol Museums in terms of representation and access for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, but to take a lead on decision-making. With that in mind, Jo began to curate an exhibition about disability stories hidden within the collections, many of which had not been revealed or made public before. She spent several months researching the collections, discovering objects that related to disability, and in many cases updated the museum catalogue to refresh historical terms to ensure more inclusive and respectful language.

Sadly, owing to unforeseen personal circumstances, Jo was unable to complete her placement. A coproduction group of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people continued to work on the project, further developing the exhibition. They were joined in July of this year by Curatorial Fellowship Assistant Freya Purcell who picked up where Jo left off. Freya did an exemplary job of adding audio, video and tactile access elements to the exhibition and saw it through to completion.

Titled *Concealed/Reveal: Disabled, D/deaf and neurodivergent artists driving creativity*, the exhibition exposes some of the hidden stories behind the lives of some famous and not-so-famous artists, from the likes of Renoir and Matisse to local artist Bartram Hiles and sideshow performer Patrick Cotter.

It challenges preconceptions about disability and shows how disability can be a creative and innovative force. It also encourages use of the social rather than medical model of disability, recognizing that people are disabled not by impairment but societal barriers, both social and physical.

Concealed/Reveal was officially launched in October at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery to rave reviews.

To see and hear the delight of the coproduction group as they experienced the culmination of their work was, for me, sufficient justification for the entire project. There can be little doubt that Curating for Change has indeed delivered positive change – and Bristol Museums will continue to share learning from the project, seek to better represent D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people and build on the success of the Accentuate programme. In October Esther Fox, strategic lead for Curating for Change, was named winner of the Heritage category in the 2023 National Lottery Awards – recognition that could hardly be more deserved.

Concealed/Reveal: Disabled, D/deaf and neurodivergent artists driving creativity is on view at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery until 28 April 2024.

Lee Hutchinson Curator of History

Part of the *Concealed/Reveal*
exhibition at BMAG
© Bristol Culture



▲ *Portrait of Samuel Johnson by Samuel William Reynolds Junior (1773-1835). Samuel Johnson's experience of living with Tourette's and depression led him to take up the solitary occupation of writing – without which his famous dictionary might never have been created.*

© Bristol Culture



Croft Castle and Parkland

Wednesday 11 October 2023

The coach journey to Croft Castle was enhanced by wonderful views of rural England - villages with many traditional dwellings and patchworks of green and brown fields with the trees in their autumn colours. We arrived at Croft Castle at the same time as the rain and were pleased to take shelter in the castellated country house and its estate church. After an introductory talk about the history of the house and the families who had occupied and shaped it, we explored the wonderful collection of artefacts collected over the centuries.

It was a special time to explore because the Croft Estate was hosting an Apple Gathering to celebrate the cultural significance of the apple and Herefordshire's important apple-growing history. Botanical drawings and paintings, with information on the history of local apple growing and on the botanists who had nurtured it, were hung throughout the house, amidst the more traditional family portraits. In the grounds, there were themed installations to discover.

All evidence of the original defensive castle on the site had long since disappeared, save for the remains of an Iron Age fort in the grounds. The estate was recorded in the Domesday Book (1085 AD) in the ownership of the Croft family, which lasted for nearly 1,000 years. They experienced turbulent times, including Civil War and, later, financial problems. The latter caused the estate to be sold, although it was re-purchased by the family in more modern times. Portraits of family members through the ages display costumes and fashions over this long period. Most notable, in terms of the history of the family, are those of the three Royalist brothers, two of whom were killed in the Civil War. After their death, the main buildings were demolished to prevent them falling into Parliamentary hands. The surviving brother, the Bishop of Hereford, was responsible for the re-building, using some of the original stones, in the late 17th century. He chose to build a comfortable country house to which he and his heirs added more fashionable Gothic features. The imposing castellated appearance is simply a façade; the huge windows would make the house impossible to defend.

Once the Croft family repurchased the house, they made significant structural and décor changes. The décor seen today dates from the 1920s to 30s. As with many National Trust properties, inheritance claims and the changed use of the estate due to the great wars of the 20th century meant it became unviable as a private residence. Eventually, the estate was taken over by the NT, although the Croft family still use two apartments in the house.

The grounds are most impressive, featuring many ancient trees and splendid views over a large lake. The walks around the grounds looked inviting, but not in the rain! The walled garden, some two acres and more sheltered from the worst of the elements, was constructed in 1801. Including the substantial greenhouse, this garden has been kept in constant cultivation but, unusually, it houses more lawn, floral borders and shrubbery than fruit and vegetables. It is managed by just two gardeners and a band of enthusiastic volunteers.

We also had the church to explore, and other outbuildings. The church seemed rather forlorn, having lost over the years most of its congregation and with its walls adorned with many memorials to past worshippers.

We were able to buy delicious food and beverages from the café in the former stables. This was accessed from the driveway by an impressive Gothic archway through a stone wall which added to the image of a former castle. There was also a well-stocked second hand bookshop but, sadly, no shop!

Thank you to Carol Lear for organising this trip to one of the lesser known, but most interesting, NT properties. I felt that I was walking through the achievements and trials and tribulations of 1,000 years of family history.

Andrea Langfield



▲ Amazing old tree in the parkland



▲ An apple gathering installation in the courtyard of Croft Castle

Photos by Andrea Langfield and Nigel Tasker

▼ A view of the lake at Croft Castle



Compton Verney

Wednesday 27 September 2023

Compton Verney is a beautiful old house set in a 120-acre park designed by Capability Brown. It opened as a nationally-accredited art gallery in March 2004 with six permanent collections. The highlight of our visit was a guided walk around the James Audubon exhibition, which displayed prints from his *Birds of America* books currently on loan from the National Museum of Scotland. Through his work, Audubon is regarded as a conservationist. He was the first person to ring birds with coloured yarns and by doing that discovered that many returned to the same locations every year. However we were surprised to learn that not only was Audubon a slave owner, but that his artwork depended heavily on hunting and killing the birds he drew.

Born in Haiti in 1785 and educated in France, Audubon went to the USA to avoid being drafted into the French army. He became an American citizen in 1812 determined to draw American birds with authentic scenery in the background. To do this, he first watched the birds and then shot them to get close-up details. He also stuffed many of them and became famous as a taxidermist.

As the drawings did not sell well in the USA, Audubon came to England where his images of the birds of America (several of them – such as the Bird of Washington – being entirely fictitious) became a great sensation. He met many famous people, including Sir Walter Scott, and made enough money on his tour to begin publishing *The Birds of America*, a massive work showing over 700 North American bird species, which was sold in instalments. It cost, in today's money, over \$2,000,000 to produce. His brother helped him but did not get any credit and nor did the 50 colourists who drew in the backgrounds. The birds were shown actual size, the images printed on double elephant folio paper (39.5 inches tall x 28.5 inches wide), with the backgrounds painted in afterwards.

Audubon died in 1851. Unfortunately, his wife had to sell his works to survive following his death. In 1896, the Audubon Society was created and much of the conservationism credited to the artist was actually the work of the Society. Whilst the drawings are amazing, it is sad to think that the birds were killed for this, although this was perhaps inevitable in those pre-photography days. To emphasise this, at the end of the exhibition there was a film about bird decline in the USA.

There was a second exhibition of drawings by Quentin Blake called *Birds, Beasts and Explorers* – a good antidote to Audubon, as Blake's cartoons gave everyone something to laugh at. Blake was born in 1932 and is still alive illustrating children's books. I particularly enjoyed his tapestry of a griffin. There was a film about how Blake composed his drawings. This exhibition was great for children of all ages!

On the ground floor there was a display of some of Compton Verney's collection of Italian paintings, called *Sensing Naples in the 18th century*. A large painting of Vesuvius erupting had a bottle with a squeeze pump that gave off the smell of the volcano, presumably intended for children but enjoyed by some of the Friends! Another painting of the harbour had a bottle of fish smells and another the smell of flowers from a flower arrangement. It was very clever. There were various models with moveable parts which were great fun. I very much enjoyed seeing the models made by Trapani in copper, silver, coral and mother of pearl.

There was a good selection of art for all to see, so thank you to Carol Lear for organising this fascinating day out.

Catherine Dixon



▲ A portrait of James Audubon



▲ Compton Verney House

Photos by Catherine Dixon

▼ A Great Footed Hawk – the first successful plate sold in the UK



The Puppet Place

Friday 22 September 2023

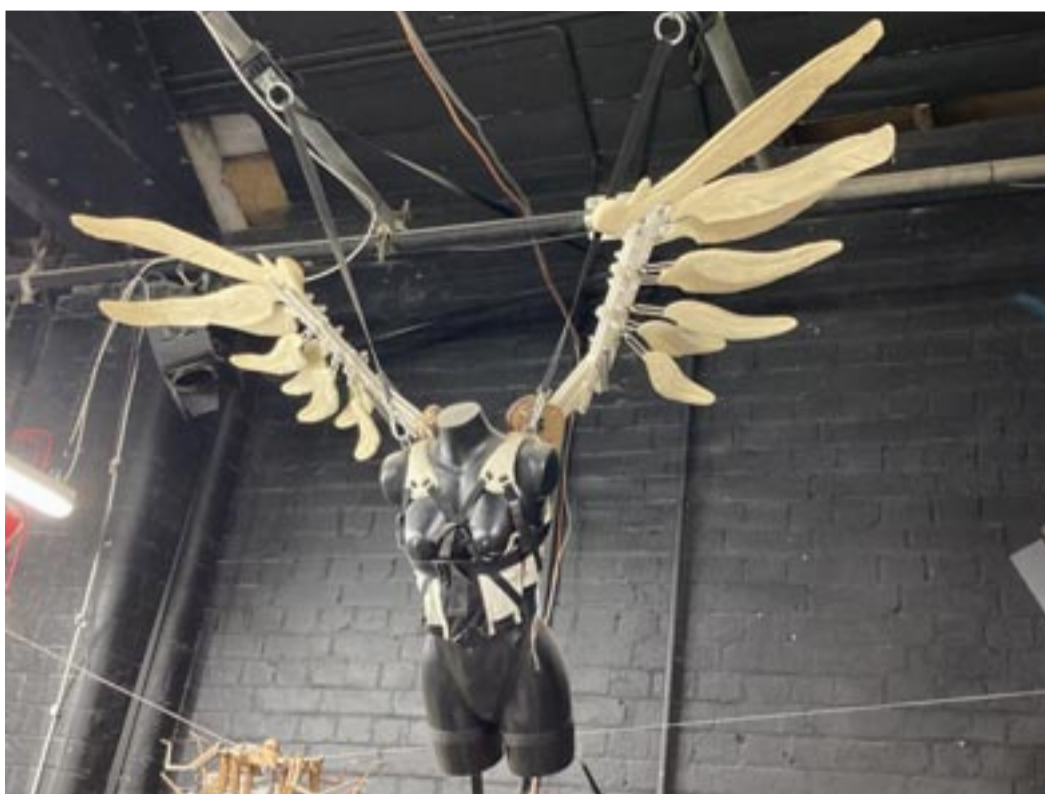
Tucked away behind the *SS Great Britain*, a doorway marked 'The Puppet Place' leads to a small projection room. Here we were introduced to the organisation by Sally Reay, the part-time Finance and Operations Manager and sole employee. We learned that this small charity was established 40 years ago with the purpose of supporting the puppet sector in the south west. Space is rented out to puppet-makers, writers and set-designers for making puppets, rehearsing performances and so on. They also provide affordable workshops for up-and-coming groups. When things ground to a halt during Covid, they set up the Bristol 48 Hour Film Challenge, an annual event which continues today.

We were introduced to a charming but rather dark five-minute animated film entitled *Beltane* by its writer, Matt. It was produced on a tight budget with support from the British Film Institute with about 25 people involved in its making, many of them students from UWE. Later, on our workshop tour, the puppets used in the film were laid out for us to see. We learned from Helena, the director of the film, that the process is called stop-motion animation, where the puppets are carefully moved and readjusted between each shot. At 24 frames per second, it is no wonder the film took almost six months to complete.

We were taken outside and through a pair of innocuous metal and bamboo gates, across a



▲ An Aladdin's cave of puppets
Photo by Sue Pears



◀ One of the robotics at the Puppet Place
Photo by Mary Bailey

small garden to a space that opened out like an Aladdin's cave. What was once a shipyard has now become workshops, the walls of which are lined with extraordinary creatures, some of them familiar, some enchanting and some quite terrifying, but all of them very colourful. There were puppets of every size and variety: shadow puppets, stringed puppets, hand-held puppets.

We were surprised that the puppets used in *Beltane* were so tiny. Helena explained that they were made from recycled material where possible and dipped many times into latex. How patient she must have been to produce all those little toadstools.

There were also a convincing fish skeleton constructed out of cable ties and a partly-made mesh dinosaur having his tail designed.

Back in the performance space we saw a selection of films made for the 48 Hour Challenge. Participants can prepare in advance but cannot get going until the three key words for the challenge are released. Then they have 48 hours to complete the whole thing. There were entries from all over the world from both professionals and amateurs. No one is paid for the films, it is about showcasing talent and skills. The techniques used were not limited to animation and gave us a good idea of all the things that may go on at the Puppet Place.

Sally explained that, at the moment, they have no external funding and, with a short lease, are unable to get grants to develop the site. But she is positive that the Puppet Place will continue to do what Bristol is so good at doing: being a centre for skills and creativity in small enterprises.

Thank you to Sally and her team for such an inspiring visit and to Carol Ouvry for taking us to yet another surprising place in Bristol.

Sue Pears



▲ *Body parts for different puppets*

Photo by Sue Thurlow



▶ *Clown puppet at the Puppet Place*

Photo by Mary Bailey

The National Waterways Museum, Gloucester

Thursday 24 August 2023

Nearly a full coach descended on the National Waterways Museum at Gloucester Docks. We were let free to wander the two floors of bygone artefacts learning about the lives and work of the people who lived and worked on the Sharpness Canal. This is a very family-friendly museum, and I enjoyed the colourful displays of metal objects such as buckets and teapots, beautifully decorated with floral patterns. There were also many entertaining activities to keep us amused. One energetic display allowed visitors to rock a section of the floor to make a boat on a TV screen move from side to side to demonstrate how workers used to break the ice on the canal to clear the waterway. In Bristol docks the steam tug *Mayflower* was used as an ice breaker partly because it was not fuelled by diesel, which could freeze up in cold weather.

Among the fascinating facts I learned was that at certain times of day the water flows backwards in the Sharpness Canal and that rare migratory fish called twaite shads, which normally live out in the Atlantic and Mediterranean, have been found living happily in the fresh water of the canal.

The Sharpness Canal is 16 miles long and connects Gloucester Docks to Sharpness, bypassing a treacherous stretch of the River Severn. It has one lock, 16 swing bridges and was once the widest and deepest canal in the world, being 88 feet and 6 inches (26.9m) wide – a true ship canal able to take a craft of 600 tons (544,311kg) up to 190 ft (57.9m) long. The canal was once very important for transporting zinc, tin and dried fruit. During World War II, six unpowered barges named *Sabrina* 1 to 6 carried imports from ships at Avonmouth inland. Mr Cadbury was very keen to use the canal for moving ingredients for his chocolate. As ships increased in size, they could not navigate the canal and it was given over to pleasure and leisure craft.

In the afternoon we had a boat trip on *Queen Boadicea II* down part of the Sharpness Canal. She was built in 1936 and was used on the Thames. During World War II she was one of the small boats used in the evacuation of Dunkirk and still has the brass plaque to prove it. She eventually returned to sailing on the Thames and was sold in the 1970s to work in south Devon, then moved to the museum in Gloucester. The skipper gave us details about the various warehouses on the canal side and also the ex-lightship *Sula*, which has been restored and is awaiting repurposing – its career as a massage parlour did not last long! The boat trip was a lovely way to end the day and we were lucky to have sunshine. Thanks to Richard Avery for organising a super day.

Catherine Dixon



▲ Queen Boadicea II leaving the docks with a swing bridge opened in background



▲ A sign from a lock on the Sharpness

Ex-lightship *Sula* ▶



Photos by Catherine Dixon

Avon Gorge

John Scandrett Harford's *View of the Avon and Bristol from Leigh Woods*

Bristol Museum & Art Gallery has recently acquired this *View of the Avon Gorge and Bristol from Leigh Woods* by John Scandrett Harford the Younger, 1787 – 1866. Those familiar

with Bristol School painting may be somewhat accustomed to monumental views of the Avon Gorge landscape. The collection boasts a wonderful array of these views by artists such as Francis Danby, Samuel Jackson, and Joseph Mallord William Turner.

What distinguishes this depiction of that subject is the maker himself. John Scandrett Harford was a banker by trade rather than professional artist. Harford belonged to an affluent Quaker family who occupied Blaise Castle Estate. He was a partner in the local bank Miles, Harford, Battersby and Bayly of Corn Street, also acting as High Sheriff for Cardiganshire, (1825–26), Director of the GWR, and owner of the Harford & Bristol Brass Co.

As well as an influential merchant, Harford was a significant figure in the cultural development of Bristol in the early 19th century. He was a founding member of the Museum's forerunner, the Bristol Institution on Park Street (opened 1823). While active in the Bristol Institution, Harford contributed predominantly to their Sub-Committee for the Fine Arts. He was instrumental in organising the Exhibitions of Pictures, having personally loaned more than twenty paintings to their 1820s exhibitions. Interestingly, following the construction of the Bristol Institution building in the early 1820s, Harford hired the Institution's architect, Charles Robert Cockerell (1788–1863), to extend Blaise Castle by adding a Picture Gallery to the existing Neoclassical structure.

As well as a wealthy merchant, Harford was an amateur artist, a writer, and an aficionado of the Italian High Renaissance. His publications include *A Life of Michel Angelo Buonarroti* in two volumes (1857) and *Recollections of the life of William Wilberforce* (1862); he was a close friend of both Wilberforce and Hannah More.

During his time with the Bristol Institution, Harford was particularly devoted to encouraging opportunities for local artists. He was instrumental in organising free season tickets to the exhibitions for artists from both Bristol and Bath and granting them permission to study from the Old Master paintings. He went on to co-found and lead activities at the Royal West of England Academy from December 1844 onwards.

The View of the Avon and Bristol from Leigh Woods demonstrates Harford's own artistic talents. His lifelong leadership in fostering opportunities and engagement with the visual arts is illustrated by this rather accomplished watercolour, which formed an integral part of our bicentenary exhibition *Opulent Origins: 200 Years of Displaying Fine Art*. The collection boasts two more Harford watercolours and is certainly enriched by the material legacy of this most fascinating man and amateur artist.

The acquisition was made possible through the ACE/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the most generous support of the Friends.

Emma Meehan Curatorial Trainee



▲ **The Avon Gorge and Bristol from Leigh Woods c. 1830 by John Scandrett Harford, 1787 – 1866. Pencil, Watercolour & Gum Arabic on Paper**
© Bristol Culture

A visit from the Caribbean Social Forum

In September, Bristol Museums were delighted to host a visit from the Caribbean Social Forum, a not-for-profit organisation based in Woolwich, London. It was set up in 2015 by members of the Windrush generation to provide a networking platform for members, believing that communication and social activities are key to leading healthier lives and combatting isolation.

The Forum is particularly interested in cultural heritage and has worked with various organisations, including Royal Museums Greenwich, on helping them to better represent people of African heritage. In 2022 they organised a 'museum takeover' day at the National Maritime Museum, in which they collaborated with historians, artists and performers to curate a day of activities that celebrated a fusion of cultures from Africa, the Caribbean and the UK.

This year, they toured museums in the south west, visiting Bath, Bristol and Exeter. On arriving in Bristol, their first stop was M Shed, where they were treated to a morning of activity focussed on Black history. This included tours of the galleries, a visit to the Transatlantic Slave Trade section on the first floor, talks, presentations and tours behind the scenes to view the Colston statue temporarily in store.

During the afternoon, the group visited Bristol Museum and Art Gallery and the Georgian House, where they viewed artworks by Peter Brathwaite that celebrate Black portraiture, a display about the house's former owner John Pinney and his involvement in the trafficking of enslaved Africans, and many other aspects of the house and its contents.

The Forum's founder, Pamela Franklin, said that they were particularly taken with the Peter Braithwaite exhibition and had a 'brilliant time'.

The Forum hopes that their Bristol visit will help to establish new connections between Bristol and London, and they are keen to welcome new members. It is open to men and women over the age of fifty. For further information about the Forum, please visit their website at www.caribbeansocialfor.wixsite.com.

Lee Hutchinson Curator (History)



▲ **Former Senior Curator of World Cultures Sue Giles (centre) and Julz Davis (right) of Curiosity UnLtd, seen here in the Transatlantic Slave Trade section of M Shed, providing a talk on Bristol's Black history**
© Bristol Culture

▼ **Sue Thurlow, Chair of the Friends of Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives, leads a tour behind the scenes to view the Colston statue temporarily in M Shed store**
© Bristol Culture



FRIENDS OF BRISTOL MUSEUMS GALLERIES & ARCHIVES

**Bristol Museum &
Art Gallery,
Queen's Road,
Bristol,
BS8 1RL**

Tel: 0117 922 3571

**bristolmuseums@bristol.gov.uk
www.bristolmuseums.org.uk**

FBMGA committee

Patrons

Sir George White Bt
Max Hebditch CBE
Francis Greenacre

Chair

Sue Thurlow
07836 693589
sue.thurlow@outlook.com

Secretary

Katherine Martin
07891 547624

Membership Secretary & FBMGA website manager

Richard Avery
0117 329 6656
rchrdrvry@gmail.com

Treasurer

Robert Walters
0117 9682639

Events Group Chair

Mary Bailey
0117 942 1944
events@friendsofbmga.org.uk

Members:

Lucy Bailey
07518 396207

Clive Burlton
01934 832113

Susan Hibberd
01934 833544

Carol Lear
0117 942 3610

Toby Pinn
0117 2517251

Sir Stephen Sparks

FBMGA website

www.friendsofbmga.org.uk

**Newsletter designed and
edited by Tim and Ann Wood**
tim-wood@blueyonder.co.uk
07917 331810

The opinions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily represent those of the FBMGA or Bristol Culture

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