

Newsletter

Christmas is here!

In this edition

- News from Bristol's museums, galleries and archives
- A new online catalogue
- Details of exhibitions
- Reports of members' trips to the Museum of Electricity, Owlpen Manor and Coughton Castle

**December 2025
Issue 231**

From the Chair

It was lovely to see so many of you at M Shed for our AGM and some fascinating short talks from the museum team.

The AGM ran smoothly, and we said goodbye to two of our trustees, Lucy Bailey and Robert Walters. When I first met Lucy she was a trustee of Friends of Bristol Art Gallery and in 2023 – after a few years off to focus on her fine art PhD – she re-joined us as a trustee. Robert has been our Treasurer since 2016. He stepped in to fill a vacancy at just the right time when we were working towards the merger of the two original Friends groups and has looked after our finances ever since. We are grateful to both of them for their contributions to the success of the Friends. We re-elected all our other trustees (listed on the back page) and elected Steve Sparks, already a trustee since 2023, as our new Treasurer.

The talks from the museum team were very interesting and the speakers were as usual emphatic as to how much they value our support. The fact that four of them gave up their Saturday afternoon to talk to us is for me a tangible demonstration of that.

British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM) Annual Conference 2025

The BAFM conference that we hosted at M Shed on 4 October was a significant success, with lots of positive feedback. The speakers were excellent, and the whole day ran to timetable without a hitch, largely thanks to the exemplary preparation by the Events Group and the small team of volunteers who checked in the delegates and provided ad hoc support during the day. In the lunch break participants were also able to enjoy the annual Docks Heritage Weekend taking place on the quayside.

At the start the delegates were welcomed to the city and to the museum by Peaches Golding, Lord-Lieutenant of the County and City of Bristol – whose short speech was particularly relevant to the focus of the conference, ‘Who do we Represent?’ – and by Philip Walker, Head of Culture and Creative Industries for Bristol. All the speakers (listed in our last Newsletter) were excellent and one in particular, Claire Byfield, Head of Supporter Engagement at The British Museum, included ideas that delegates felt they could apply almost straight away. One remark that she made seemed to resonate immediately with the audience: ‘The difference between a children’s activity at the museum and an adult one is often just a glass of wine’.

Chairman Daniel Calley presenting the BAFM National Newsletter Award to Sue Thurlow.
© Mary Bailey



Our Newsletter wins another national award!

I am delighted to report that at the BAFM conference we were announced as joint winners of the BAFM Newsletter Award for 2025, along with the London Transport Museum. Producing and distributing our newsletter each quarter is a significant undertaking, and it is fitting that the work of our editors Tim and Ann Wood, and the many contributors of articles and images (both members and museum staff) should be recognised.

Caroline Booth-Morris

You will see in the Museum Report that Caroline Booth-Morris, who along with Beth Cutter has been our primary point of contact with the museums service over the last couple of years, has left for a new job at the Royal West of England Academy. Caroline and Beth have continued to impress me with how seamlessly they have made the job-share work, and both have been wonderfully supportive of the Friends. We await decisions as to what happens next, but Beth has a strong team to support her, and I am sure that since Caroline has moved only 400 yards up the road from BMAG our paths will continue to cross from time to time. Many thanks to Caroline (and to Beth) for being such easy people to work with.

Research findings: Looking at art really is good for you!

We all knew that already, but a recent study has produced some tangible scientific evidence that looking at art in a gallery really is good for us. The work was undertaken by King’s College London and co-funded by Art Fund and the Psychiatry Research Trust. The study measured the physiological responses of participants while viewing

Cover photo: *Detail of Village Gathering by Sam Ntiro 1962*

© artist’s estate

Clivedon Conservation specialists hard at work

© Kate Iles



▼ *Kings Weston Roman Villa walls after conservation.*

© Kate Iles



masterpieces by world-renowned artists in a gallery. The research found that looking at original works of art activates the immune, hormone, and autonomic nervous systems all at once – something never previously recorded. As the shorter days and winter weather curtail some of our outdoor activities perhaps those findings can add extra impetus to our plans to visit museums and galleries so we can experience these now-proven health benefits first-hand.

In other news. . .

Those of you who visit the top floor of BMAG will have seen that the refresh of the Glass Gallery, to which we have contributed funds, is well under way – and our support is prominently noted on the notice explaining to visitors what is going on. As we go to press the gallery itself has had all its defects fixed and been redecorated, and the existing cases have been refurbished and relined ready for next steps.

Bristol Harbour Railway's return to The Cut has taken a significant step forward, with the first section of rail having been re-laid in October after the years of hiatus caused by the work on the guided busway and the landslip. There are

more hurdles to be overcome, but this feels to me like the first publicly visible step towards the steam trains running again on that route.

And finally, the conservation work needed on the walls at Kings Weston Roman Villa has now been completed. Ahead of that there was a week of volunteer effort to extract all the weeds out of the above-ground walls to prepare them for the specialist conservators, and I enjoyed playing a part in that. In my wildest dreams I had never imagined spending a few happy hours sitting in a ditch carefully excavating weeds from 1950s mortar in Roman walls using a re-purposed dentist's pick.

Sue Thurlow Chair

Museum Friends' Sewing Group

After a long break the Friends' Sewing Group has become active again and we are currently helping at Blaise Museum to mend the dressing-up clothes, which are well used and consequently need attention. This will be an ongoing task, and we are also planning to make some more costumes to fill gaps in the range on offer.

In the past we have helped to mend and to make costumes for special exhibitions for many different departments of the museum service, from archaeology to dinosaurs and including characters from Aardman films.

We meet as and when needed – currently at Blaise but sometimes at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery – and members take on whatever they feel able to do. If you would like to join us in helping to do any sewing tasks that are needed in the Museum, please contact Carol Ouvry: Tel: 0117 302 1039 or carol@ouvry.myzen.co.uk.

Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives

People news

For almost three years Caroline Booth-Morris and I, job-sharing the Development Manager role, have been the primary point of contact between the Friends' trustees and the whole of the museums service. Caroline has now moved on to an exciting new role at the Royal West of England Academy, just up the road from BMAG. It has been an absolute pleasure sharing this job with her over the last few years. She has achieved amazing things for the service, including securing major sponsors for our exhibitions, putting together the Grayson's Art Club Prize Draw and, of course, smashing all our targets for the Turner fundraising campaign! For the time being I will be leading the Development Team solo while we decide the best route forwards with recruitment.

Following a re-alignment of some roles, Fran Coles, Senior Conservator, is taking on responsibility for the Working Exhibits from Helen McConnell Simpson, Senior Curator, History. Fran will be working closely with Chris Ecclestone and the Working Exhibits team to care for some of the largest items in our collections.

Funding for the Museums Service

Bristol Museums Service is a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). The National Portfolio is Arts Council England's regular funding programme for arts organisations, museums and libraries across England, and we are one of the 77 museums that receive a portion of this funding. NPOs help communities everywhere to enjoy the best creativity and culture. That status is not granted on a permanent basis but with a three-year tenure, with specific commitments made as to a programme of activities that will be undertaken to further develop the service.

Performance is monitored in various ways including by a locally-appointed independent Oversight Board, of which Steve Sparks, one of the Friends' trustees, is a member. Much of the programme is progressing well with only a couple of activities impacted by minor delays, and we are confident we can mitigate any further setbacks. This was due to be the final year of the current three-year NPO programme; however, we have been awarded an extension for the next financial year 2026-27, and ACE are planning to offer a further extension for the year 2027-28, which we will be applying for.

We have also received a further £495,320 through the Museum Renewal Fund. This is a programme delivered by Arts Council England on behalf of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and is intended to support museums in stabilising their financial situation and building towards sustainable and thriving futures. This funding is partly to support operating costs, such as staffing hours and overheads, but also offers the opportunity for some additional programming to support income generation.

Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

We have already completed some important building projects recently dealing with problems such as behind-the-scenes damp, and leaking roofs, thanks to the Museum Estate and Development Fund (MEND). MEND is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the grants are administered, awarded, and monitored by Arts Council England. There is one final round of MEND grants available, round 5, and we have applied for a significant sum to allow us to make urgent repairs to BMAG's roof, rainwater goods, windows and facades. Seed funding for that application has been provided by Bristol Museums Development Trust and by Bristol City Council's Capital Budget. The decision as to whether we have been successful is expected around February.

Bring Turner Home update

It was, of course, disappointing that the story of the Bring Turner Home campaign did not end with the museum acquiring *The Rising Squall* as we had hoped. However, we have continued to see many positive outcomes. The warmth of feeling, goodwill and positivity directed towards BMGA was extraordinary and there have been more than 90 pieces of media coverage so far. We also now have the learning from running a hugely successful crowdfunding campaign which attracted 1,685 donors and raised £109,000 in seven days and have a database of people who, as well as contributing to the campaign, said they were interested in hearing more about BMGA.

Because we had generated so much interest, we have put together a temporary exhibition of our four fragile Turner watercolours, three of which are also of the Avon Gorge, together with related pictures on the same theme and displays telling the stories of some of the very special natural history of the gorge.



▲ J M W Turner's watercolour *Avon Gorge and Bristol Hotwells* displayed in the *Prince of the Rocks* exhibition
© Bristol Museums & Archives



▲ Red Lodge from the garden
© Chris Bahn

Blaise Museum, the Georgian House and Red Lodge

The houses will all soon be in hibernation for the winter, but their outlook is a little rosier than it was this time last year when proposals in the draft BCC budget for 2026/7 were to close them to the public for a year while there were discussions about how they might operate in future at no cost to BCC. Many of you will have signed the petition asking the council to rethink, which had over 3,000 signatures. Thankfully that proposal was then deferred for a year, to give us time to come up with alternatives to closure. The proposal now in the draft budget for 2027/8, which will be decided by full council in February, allows for a gradual reduction in the budget for the houses over a period of three years during which time BMGA will implement a number of initiatives aimed at generating income from them without impacting on their historic fabric or collections.

Beth Cutter Development Manager

Exhibitions

Family Festive Fun at Blaise Museum

6 & 7 December. Family ticket: £18 (up to 5 adults and/or children age 4+), other tickets available

Join the Blaise team for a family activity weekend to celebrate the festive season with decorations, crafts and traditional music. There will be lots of different activities to take part in

including a nature trail, creative activities making something to take home, dressing up, exploring the museum decorated for the season.

Santa Claus' Café at BMAG

Weekends 6–21 December 10:30, 12:00 and 2:00 (advance booking essential via museum website)

Child ticket with gift from Santa £25, adult £15

Bring the kids for a magical time with food, storytelling, and a winter trail around the museum as well as a special meet and greet from Santa Claus himself. Pick your slot for either breakfast, lunch, or afternoon cake all served with a drink. Each child will get time to speak with Santa, who is looking forward to giving them a special gift.

Our cosy café is the perfect way to kick off Christmas together before joining the elves for activities around the museum. Spaces sell fast, so make sure you get your time with Santa booked in before he heads back to the north pole!

Family Festive Fun at The Georgian House Museum

13–14 December 2025, entry slots at 11.00, 12.00, 1.00, 2.00, and 3.00. Family ticket: £18 (up to 5 adults and/or children age 4+), other tickets available.

Advance booking (via the museum website) advised, but drop-ins possible on the day if not fully booked

Join the Georgian House team for a family activity weekend to celebrate the festive season with decorations, crafts and traditional music. There will be lots of different activities to take part in including a Georgian mouse trail tracking down the cute critters in their festive costumes; creative activities making something to take home; dressing up; and exploring the historic museum decorated for the season.

Prince of the Rocks: JMW Turner and the Avon Gorge

BMAG 1st floor temporary exhibition gallery until 11 January 2026 Free

Come and see Bristol through Turner's eyes.

Celebrating Turner's 250th birthday we are displaying four rare watercolours painted during Turner's first visit to the city in 1791, when aged just 16 he explored the Avon Gorge and earned the nickname 'Prince of the Rocks'.

These early works reveal his growing skill in architectural detail, natural observation and dramatic composition. This is the first time these fragile watercolours have been shown in over a decade.

The works sit alongside beautiful flora and fauna from the Avon Gorge to show why Turner was so inspired by our city. The Avon Gorge is designated as a Special Site of Scientific Interest and a Special Area of Conservation. We are proud to showcase its beauty and rarity, including the Bristol Whitebeam – a tree species found nowhere else in the world, discovered by Miss Martha Attwood in 1852 – and the beautiful Bristol diamonds.



▲ *Ocean Lion*

© Griet van Malderen, Wildlife Photographer of the Year

Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2025

BMAG ground floor temporary exhibition gallery until 26 April 2026. Standard ticket without donation £8, other tickets available

Step into the breath-taking beauty and raw power of nature with Wildlife Photographer of the Year – the world's most prestigious photography exhibition, now in its sixty-first year. This globally acclaimed showcase features 100 awe-inspiring images that reveal the hidden stories of our planet's wildlife and comes to Bristol from the Natural History Museum in London.

Selected from over 60,000 entries submitted by photographers of all ages and backgrounds from 113 countries and territories, these photographs are more than just stunning visuals – they are windows into the complex, fragile, and magnificent ecosystems we share. From intimate glimpses of rarely seen animal behaviour to sweeping landscapes that stir the soul, each image invites you to reflect on your connection to the natural world.

This year's exhibition is a powerful call to action. Through the lens of the world's finest nature photographers, it highlights the urgency of conservation and the beauty worth protecting. Whether you are a photography enthusiast, a nature lover, or simply curious, Wildlife Photographer of the Year promises to inspire, provoke, and ignite a deeper appreciation for the planet we all call home.

Bristol Pride x Martin Parr

BMAG second floor temporary exhibition gallery until 29 March

Legendary photographer Martin Parr teams up with Bristol Pride and Bristol Museums to showcase a retrospective of his photos of the city's annual Pride festival.

Parr's work is characterised by a fly-on-the-wall and candid documentary style, famous for provoking a wide range of reactions. His work has been collected by many of the world's leading museums, including the Tate, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He established the Bristol-based Martin Parr Foundation in 2017.

Winter Lectures

M Shed and online, all 7.30 – 9.00pm

Pay what you can. Advance booking (via the museum website, where there are also more details) essential for online, advisable for in-person booking, but drop-ins possible on the day if not fully booked. Sponsored by the Friends.

Turner and Constable – rivals or colleagues?

8 January

The two great early nineteenth-century British landscape painters Turner and Constable have long been compared and contrasted. Coinciding with the exhibition at Tate Britain which will directly compare the work of the two artists, this lecture by art historian and curator Anne Lyles will seek to discuss their differing characters and art at the same time as investigating their shared goals in the promotion of a new type of British landscape art.

Facing Extinction

12 February

In the halls of natural history museums all over the world, you can peer through the glass and come face-to-face with the ghosts of extinction. Extinction has been going on as long as there has been biological life – in fact over 99% of all species that have ever existed on Earth are extinct – but extinction usually happens at a slow pace. We are now, however, living through the Sixth Mass Extinction, with species rapidly going extinct because of human actions. These are the ghosts of extinction in museums.

Our speaker Dolly Jørgensen, Professor of History at the University of Stavanger, will share some of the stories she came across visiting over 80 museums worldwide while researching her new book, *Ghosts Behind Glass*.

Circular arguments? – developing new understandings of the Neolithic monument of Avebury

12 March

The speakers for the final Winter Lecture of the season are Professors Mark Gillings (Bristol) and Joshua Pollard (Southampton).

One of the pre-eminent monumental landscapes of Europe, Avebury has been vexing researchers since its discovery as an object of antiquarian enquiry in the mid-17th century. However, despite nearly 400 years of study, what we do not know about Avebury still dwarfs what we do. In an attempt to rectify this, the last decade has seen a burst of new studies at the site; investigations that are not only challenging and unsettling accepted stories but also shedding remarkable new light on the emergence and history of this monumental landscape.



◀ Friends browsing the fascinating display of electrical appliances

All photos by
Catherine Dixon

The Museum of Electricity

Thursday 30 October 2025

The Museum of Electricity in Cairns Road has recently reopened following a substantial upgrade. The substation has increased in size with the addition of a large room for groups and further items of interest have been added to the collection of exhibits. The substation was built in 1929 to serve northwest Bristol but was expanded as more houses were built in the area. It ended up with 4 switch rooms, which are still operational.

The museum houses an interesting and comprehensive collection of electrical appliances. Among the items are early tea makers, refrigerators and washing machines and some more esoteric items such as a large collection of old cables and switches. Among the more unusual items is the original Bristol Cathedral organ bellows.

When works were undertaken to update the building in 2024 various pottery and glass pieces were found nearby as part of the site was originally a tip. Some of these objects have ended up in the museum. Among them was a ceramic jar from Fortt & Son, Clifton, and a half-pint milk bottle, both in good condition.

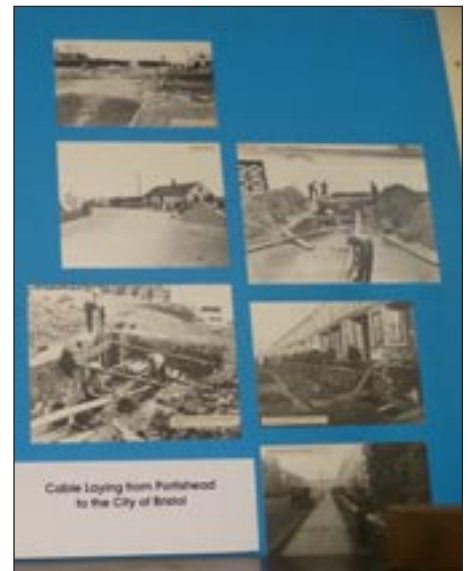
One of the items on show was a model of an All-Electric House from 1935 – the actual house is in Withy Close East off Reedley Road. It was hoped this design would be rolled out across the country, but it proved to be too expensive. There is a collection of tea towels produced by the Electrical Association for Women which was set up in 1924 advising housewives how to read electric meters and use the correct fuses.

The museum holds hundreds of old documents and books about electrical works in the area and a large collection of old photographs. Some of these showed cable-laying between Portishead and Cairns Road.

After touring the museum, we had coffee and biscuits followed by some photos of Bristol memories with Paul Hulbert. There are 15,000 indexed photos in the collection and the first one we saw was of the opening of Clifton Suspension Bridge with the first display of public electric lighting in Bristol. In 1893 an Industrial and Fine Arts Exhibition was held on the Centre, which showcased 20 electric and 80 gas lamps and was open for five months. It also demonstrated the first electric clock in Bristol. After our tour we were invited to stay and look at some old documents in the collection.

Thanks to Paul Hulbert and his volunteers and to Richard Avery for organising this fascinating visit. A special thank you to Sue Thurlow, who stood in for Richard on the day. If you were not able to attend, the museum is open on the second Thursday morning of each month from 10,30 am. For details see www.wpehs.org.uk.

Catherine Dixon



▲ Photos of cable-laying – Portishead generating station – Cairns Road substation.



▲ A model of an All-Electric House.

Keeping connected with the BECC online catalogue

In 2021, we launched an online catalogue for the British Empire & Commonwealth Collection (BECC). Since most of the collection is currently in storage, this website serves as the gateway and first point of contact for those interested in discovering the unique items within the collection. Our goal is to engage and reach global audiences, making it essential to develop this online resource effectively. To achieve this, we regularly consult with our users. Recently, we conducted a survey to gather additional data, particularly from individuals with a geographical connection to the empire.

We wanted to investigate how easily people can find our website in cyberspace, as well as their views on the quality of the object information provided. We were also eager to assess whether the content warning on our homepage is appropriate, given the sensitive nature of the collection and its focus on empire. The results of our consultation have given us much to consider. Overall, respondents found the website to be a valuable resource, but, as with most things, there is always room for improvement. Some key findings included:

- The collection needs better promotion and should be easier to locate.
- There are gaps in the representation of certain colonial histories.
- Object descriptions and records need to include more detail, especially regarding provenance and context.
- More photographs of the objects are needed.
- Clearer guidance is required for searching a mixed collection that includes both objects and archives.
- There is a need for more voices and diverse perspectives.

Next steps

We received some helpful and insightful feedback from our survey participants, who were honest and candid about ways we needed to improve the catalogue. We have taken these views onboard and written up a report of recommendations based on them. The recommendations will help inform our work on the website over the next few years. Some improvements are a bit easier to tackle than others, so we have divided the changes into short term (6-12 months) and longer term (12 month +).

We have begun efforts to improve our photography by investing in new equipment and setting up a studio in the store. Once a month, the museum's Digitisation Officer visits, and we work together to take high-quality photos of the collection. This task can be quite challenging in light-controlled storage environments, which tend to be quite dark! Nevertheless, it is fantastic to have an expert assist with the photography, as it can often be quite technical. We could not achieve such high-quality images without this help. Better images significantly enhance the collection for our visitors.

We acknowledge that there is still a challenge in making the public aware of our collection, and we are taking steps to address this issue. For example, we hold a significant and important collection of artworks that originally came from the Commonwealth Institute in London. Starting



◀ **Texts and Contexts: Home**
by Risham Hosain Syed.
Mixed media: acrylic on
board, tea wash, stencil &
photograph
© artist



▲ **Cattle Drinking by Sam Ntiro**

© Sam Nitro

in the 1960s, the Commonwealth Institute showcased exhibitions featuring works by artists from the Commonwealth – many of whom would not have received the same recognition in public gallery spaces as their European counterparts.

Fortunately, many of these remarkable artworks are now featured on the Art UK website. For instance, there are eight works by Nigerian artist Jimo Akolo (two of which will soon be included in an exhibition on Nigerian Modernism at Tate Modern). Art UK is particularly accessible for online visitors, as it allows them to search for specific artists or discover new ones, ultimately guiding them to our own website. For many, this may be their only opportunity to find our site, which highlights the need for us to enhance its discoverability.

We are already in discussions with our IT and digital teams to seek advice on improving our search engine optimization. By doing this, we aim to ensure that when people search using relevant keywords, our website will appear higher in the search results.

Additionally, we have recently joined the Art UK: Digital Skills Training for Collections programme, which aims to enhance digital skills in areas such as storytelling, marketing, and audience engagement. This training is timely, as our collection is rich with objects that can tell hidden histories or cover underrepresented subjects. It will also provide essential insights into understanding our digital audiences – who is using the collection, who is not, and how we can reach new and diverse global audiences. We may even conduct another consultation to delve deeper into ways to improve our digital offerings.

We look forward to introducing many of the other recommend.

Do have a look at the collection on our online catalogue at becc.bristol.gov.uk and the artworks on artuk.org.

Frances Davies Documentation Assistant for the British Empire & Commonwealth Collection

Nicholas Thomas

We were very sad to receive the news that Nick Thomas died recently. He had been a member of the Friends (then Bristol Magpies) since his retirement as Director of Bristol Museum back in the day when there were two separate directors: Arnold Wilson for Bristol Art Gallery and Nicholas for Bristol Museum. He also served on the Executive Committee of the Friends until he and his wife Susan moved from Bristol down to Newlyn in Cornwall.

He was a great supporter of the Friends from the very beginning. An archaeologist by training, he had the gift of communicating his enthusiasm for his subject. He will be remembered by many older Friends for his inspiring presentations at a wide variety of temples and tombs we visited in various parts of the world: Anglesey, Malta, Egypt and Orkney to name but a few. What to many people appeared to be just a grassy mound with some stones inside became – in his eloquent descriptions – an important resting place for the dead involving cultural rituals in the prehistoric society of the period.

In 2010 he came up to Bristol to take part in a study day we organised on the Bomford Collection, a fine collection of ancient glass which was close to his heart. In fact, one of the first items purchased by the then Bristol Magpies was a piece of Roman glass to add to the collection. The collection is now in store, but we hope that some items may be displayed in the refurbished glass gallery opening next year.

We remember Nick with great fondness and sadness at his passing.

Mary Bailey

Owlpen Manor

Thursday 11 September 2025

The journey to Owlpen Manor at Uley proved to be rather challenging as part of the main road was closed because of roadworks. Brenda, Richard Avery's 1960 Royal Blue coach, was having an off day – she was refusing to go down into first gear when in motion so Richard had to coax her gently up the hills. The diversion took us up a twisting steep hill on the Cotswold escarpment and then down again the other side – not an easy drive. However, once we met up with Hugo Mander, son of the owner, in Uley all was well: we negotiated the narrow lane and the drive to arrive at the property. Here we were met by the current owner, Sir Nicholas Mander, who took us through the gardens to view the house from outside, the better to observe the different periods of the building.

Owlpen Manor is a gem of a small manor house set in a steep-sided valley with tiered gardens offering a view of the hills beyond. Its survival after it was abandoned in the 19th century is thanks to the Arts and Crafts architect Norman Jewson, who bought it as a wreck in 1925 and sympathetically restored it. The property dates back to mediaeval times, when it was owned by the squires of de Olepenne, henchmen to their feudal lords at Berkeley castle. Unusually, the family retained their manor until the mid-15th century; thereafter until the 19th century the property passed to various related families, some of whom made additions and renovations at different periods. The result is a mixture of Tudor, Jacobean and Georgian architecture, with some Arts and Crafts features added by Norman Jewson. The Mander family bought the property in 1974 and have lived there ever since – the rooms in the house are full of family photos and items. Apart from the manor, there is a small banqueting house and a church.

We were allowed to wander through the rooms of the house after Sir Nicholas had described some of the features of the great hall, which dates from 1523 and contains fine pieces of furniture. The original wood-panelled Jacobean oak parlour (c. 1616) was darker and full of antique furniture, paintings and family memorabilia. The floor here had been re-laid with wood



▲ Brenda parked outside the old barn

© Mary Bailey



◀ Owlpen Manor showing the central Tudor house with the Jacobean wing on the left and the Georgian wing on the right

© Mary Bailey

in the traditional manner prescribed by Ernest Gimson, leader of the Cotswold Arts and Crafts revival; similar floors were seen upstairs.

On the other side of the great hall the doorway had been remodelled completely in an elaborate Georgian style; this and the sash windows and panelling of the little parlour beyond were created shortly after 1719 in the shell of the old service wing of the manor. This wing was the last major refurbishment of the house.

Upstairs we saw two important bedrooms: the great chamber, above the great hall, also known as Queen Margaret's room, because Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI, visited Owlpen during the Wars of the Roses. It is said to be haunted by her ghost. The painted cloths on the walls telling the story of Joseph and his brothers (a cheaper option instead of tapestries), dating to around 1700, are thought to be a unique example in England of a complete set of wallcoverings. An impressive four-poster bed dominates the room, which has fine views over the yew parterre garden.

The other bedroom, in the Jacobean wing, also contains an impressive tester bed along with a beautiful Arts and Crafts table and collections of needlework. From here there is a clear view of the small banqueting house at the end of a path flanked by massive yew trees.

We walked up the hill behind the house to view the church, which had been extensively restored in the 19th century with a tiled interior. This apparently was not to Jewson's taste, but he left it untouched.

The visit ended with a splendid cream tea in the restored old barn, which housed an enormous cider press. A new extension had been added to provide a space for wedding receptions as Owlpen is now a popular venue for weddings.

Our thanks go to Richard Avery for organising this visit and taking us there in Brenda, who behaved perfectly on the return journey to Bristol.

Mary Bailey



▲ *The great hall with the Georgian doorway to the 18th century wing*

© Mary Bailey

▼ *The Georgian little parlour created in the old service wing*

© Mary Bailey



▼ *Queen Margaret's room with the painted wall coverings*

© Mary Bailey



Coughton Court

Thursday 23 October 2025

On a gloomy and chilly Thursday morning we set off to visit Coughton Court (pronounced 'Coat-on Court') near Alcester, Warwickshire. Stopping off at Gloucester Services en-route the card machines were not working, so cash was 'king', which was quite apt as this was the day when King Charles was in Rome with Pope Leo, and the Throckmorton family of Coughton Court are Roman Catholics.

On arrival we were given a very in-depth and fascinating talk in the Roman Catholic Chapel of St Peter, St Paul and St. Elizabeth on the history of Coughton Court by an extremely knowledgeable volunteer called Bob.

There has been a building on this site since the 12th century. Originally Coughton Court was a moated manor house, but the surviving house is a Grade I-listed Tudor mansion. The Throckmorton family inherited Coughton Court in 1409 through marriage and have lived there ever since. Further marriages to local landowners increased the size of the estate. Being Roman Catholic the family was persecuted at the time of the Reformation and the Civil War. Alterations within the mansion and especially to the central tower were made to create a chapel, priest holes and secret ammunition stores. These secret stores and hidey holes became all the more essential after the family's involvement with the Throckmorton Plot of 1583 and Gunpowder Plot in 1605. Twenty-two generations of the Throckmorton family have lived at Coughton Court, but due to death duties and the decline in family finances, the house was handed over to the National Trust in 1946, although the family still live there.

Originally a gatehouse, the front hall was remodelled during the mid-1500s to create a long façade with a central tower. Two wings project from either side of this façade towards the rear to create a 'U' shaped building around a knot garden. From the top of the tower there are commanding 360-degree views across the surrounding countryside.

There are two churches at Coughton Court. Next to the house is St. Peter's church which was originally Catholic but changed to Church of England at the time of the Reformation. The other, which is a Roman Catholic church, was built in 1857 in the style of the 14th century.

The extensive gardens are managed by the family and include a floral walled garden, rose



▲ View looking over the knot garden towards the central tower with the two wings on either side
© Rosemary Thomas



▲ A view into one of the priest holes

© Rosemary Thomas

garden, orchards, a bog garden, lake and a riverside walk. The walled garden is designed as a series of rooms each with a different theme.

Before we left, Bob gave us another fascinating and in-depth talk, this time on the Gunpowder Plot.

More information about Coughton Court can be found on the website of the National Trust, www.nationaltrust.org.uk including information about the changes that will be taking place from February 2026 when the family will resume management of the Court in line with the hereditary lease.

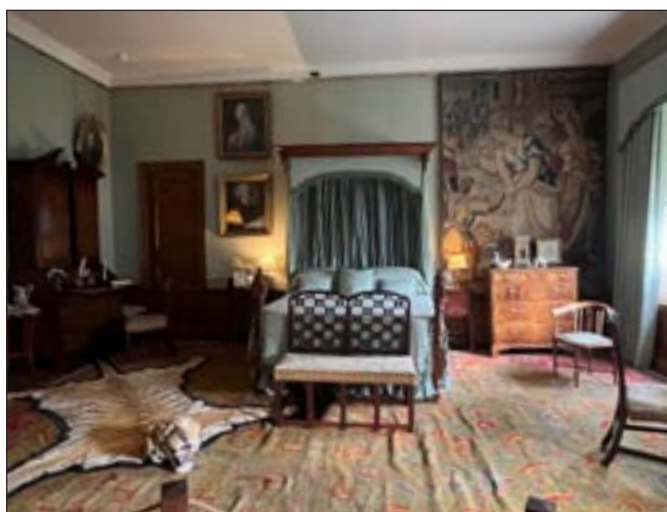
Thanks to Carol Lear for organising this interesting visit.

Rosemary Thomas



▲ Friends exploring one of the living rooms

© Rosemary Thomas



▲ One of the bedrooms

© Rosemary Thomas



View over the rear of the house showing the knot garden

© Rosemary Thomas

St Fagans National Museum of History

Tuesday 19 August 2025

St Fagan's Museum stands in the grounds of St Fagans Castle and gardens. The castle and 100-acre grounds were gifted to the people of Wales by the Earl of Plymouth and opened to the public in 1948. It is the first national open-air museum and contains over 50 historic buildings including Iron Age houses, a mediaeval church, a mediaeval prince's hall, a Victorian school, a clog maker's workshop, a tannery, a saddler's workshop and many others. Several of the buildings, which were all moved from their original sites and rebuilt to be saved for the future, contain working exhibits operated by craftworkers, who demonstrate their skills and showcase Welsh crafts through the ages.

On entering one can choose to go right to visit the castle and gardens or left for the museum of Welsh buildings. I chose to go left and see some of the many buildings which offer an insight into the culture and heritage of Wales.

My first stop was the most modern building on the site – the Gweithdy (Workshop) Galleries. Here we found



▲ **Gwalia Stores**
© Catherine Dixon



◀ **Inside one of the recreated Iron Age roundhouses at St Fagans**
© Sue Thurlow



▲ Prefab kitchen - larger than the writer's!
© Catherine Dixon

◀ Inside Llys Llywelyn mediaeval court at St Fagans
© Sue Thurlow

displays of many old implements and tools with videos of how they were used. I was particularly interested in the Iron Age artefacts from 3,000 years ago. Some of the exhibits had been found in Anglesey in a mire during World War II, when a lorry got stuck and a local had used a large chain to pull it out. The chain turned out to be one of many Iron Age items found nearby which are believed to have been put there as part of a religious ceremony. I did not see the chain – perhaps the finder kept it as a souvenir.

I enjoyed visiting a prefab (which had a bigger kitchen than mine) and the Vulcan Hotel – an ale house which was first registered in 1853 and closed in 2012, still with sawdust on the floor. St Teilo's church looked plain on the outside, but contained interior walls repainted as they would have been before Henry VIII came to the throne. At the Gwalia Stores I bought some ice cream and Welsh cakes to keep me going. In my house I still have some of the articles they were displaying on the shelves!

It was a lot to take in in one day. I shall certainly go back again and try the castle and gardens, especially as the museum is free to enter. There was a lot of walking, but a very well-stocked café revived us.

Thanks to Richard Avery for organising such a fascinating day out. The museum is not that far away and has a great website to help you plan a visit of your own.

Catherine Dixon

▼ Interior of St Teilo's Church at St Fagans
© Sue Thurlow



Lunar New Year 2026

Welcoming the Year of the Horse at BMAG

Saturday 28 February 2026, 10am-5pm

The Chinese lanterns will return this February as we host the ever-popular Lunar New Year celebration, ushering in the Year of the Horse. Also known as the Spring Festival, Lunar New Year at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery has become a cherished cultural highlight in the city's calendar.

Our museum's event grew from modest beginnings in 2000 into a vibrant weekend extravaganza. For 2026, Lunar New Year will take place over one day on 28 February. It remains our largest public event, promising a dazzling array of colourful performances, cultural and heritage stalls - many run by local community groups and Chinese student volunteers - and a special trail inviting visitors to discover horse-related objects throughout the museum.

The event promises to be particularly memorable, marking the 25th anniversary of the twin city partnership between Bristol and Guangzhou - one of China's largest cities.

The Year of the Horse in the Chinese zodiac symbolises action, positivity and adventure. People born in Horse years are believed to be energetic, warm-hearted and enthusiastic - qualities we aim to reflect in the vibrancy of this year's celebration.

Highlights include the spectacular lion dances, martial arts demonstrations, and traditional dance sequences. Families with children (and even unaccompanied adults) can enjoy hands-on craft activities; roving pandas; and dressing-up fun throughout the day. There is also a range of activities to learn about Lunar New Year and East Asian heritage.

The museum's Development Team is looking for this year's high-level sponsors. Join us in celebrating one of the most joyful occasions of the year. Admission is free, though donations are warmly welcomed to help support the delivery of this culturally-rich but logistically-demanding event.

Karen Garvey Public Programmes Officer



▲ *HM Lord Lieutenant Mrs Peaches Golding OBE feeding the lions to attract good fortune over the coming year* © Rob Browne
© Rob Browne

▼ *A skilful kung fu demonstration by Bristol Shaolin Wushu Academy*
© Rob Browne



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

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