

Newsletter

The Hay Wain is here!

In this edition

- Constable's iconic painting on display at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery
- the aquisition of Mary Carpenter's photo album
- Friends' trips to Nantgarw China Works, STEAM, Circomedia and Painswick Rococo Gardens
- behind the scenes at M Shed
- news of upcoming exhibitions and events

From the Chair

Pyronaut's 90th birthday

Pyronaut, M Shed's fire float, is possibly the most recognised of all the museum's exhibits because of its much-loved displays at Bristol Harbour Festival each year. She was first launched in June 1934, and the Friends will be contributing to her 90th birthday celebrations on 22/23 June by selling home-made cakes. There will be other special attractions at M Shed that weekend including, on Saturday, the Band of the Avon Fire and Rescue Service. If you would like to volunteer to provide cakes or to come to the museum and sell them, we would welcome your help. But if you are not able to help, we would love to see you down there anyway.

As we go to press *Pyronaut* is undergoing some age-related repairs to her hull, partly funded by us. We will cover that story in more detail in a future issue.



▲ *Pyronaut giving her spectacular display to the crowds in the harbour*

© Bristol Culture

Protest Display at M Shed

The trustees (i.e. elected committee members) of the Friends were invited to the launch in March of the redeveloped and enlarged Protest Display at M Shed, for which we provided a significant part of the funding. It was good to hear so many positive comments about the refreshed display. The new timeline was particularly well received as, starting in the 1660s, it sets the toppling of the Colston statue in a wider context to show how politics, popular culture and the history of racism and resistance interact over the centuries to create change.

Cover photo: . John Constable *The Hay Wain* detail
©National Gallery



◀ *Mary, Sue and Katherine in Lisbon*

© Katherine Martin

British Association of Friends of Museums (BAFM)

The 2024 BAFM Annual Conference, from Friday 4th to Sunday 6th October, will be hosted by The Friends of Wisbech and Fenland Museum, Cambridgeshire. Details and the booking form are now on the BAFM website.

In May Mary Bailey, Katherine Martin and I went to Lisbon for 6 days on a very enjoyable trip organised by the BAFM Chair, Daniel Calley. The flagship museums we visited were, as you would expect, full of world-class objects beautifully displayed – especially so in the Gulbenkian and the Museum of Ancient Art. It was interesting to observe, though, that they had far less emphasis on engaging with all their potential audiences than we do in Bristol and seemed to be focused on well-informed visitors who already knew a fair bit about the exhibits they were looking at. In one museum our guide actually introduced our tour by saying 'This is a lovely museum to work in as we don't get many visitors!' The National Tile Museum was an exception, with informative text in both Portuguese and English – and full of animated visitors as well as beautiful tiles – and was for me a particular treat.

Subscriptions

I mentioned in our last newsletter that we will be proposing at the AGM on 19 October that we increase subscription rates for the first time in 11 years.

We are also investigating the possible use of direct debits as an alternative means of collecting subs as they would potentially reduce the work needed every January to reconcile the receipt of standing orders. Given that our band of volunteers is steadily decreasing, it is important that we do what we can to minimise the size of the jobs we need volunteers to do but, if we implement direct debit payment of subs, we will for the foreseeable future still keep the option of paying by standing order.

Legacy news

We have recently heard that Freda Rome – known to many of you as Ros – very generously left us a significant legacy in her will. I will write more about that in our next issue but if any of you have stories to tell of Ros's involvement with the Friends please let me know.

Sue Thurlow Chair

Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

Staff news

We are pleased to welcome Sanjit Chudha to the Museums team as Public Programming Manager. Sanjit joins the museum from Museum of the Home (formerly the Geffrye Museum) where he was Director of Audiences responsible for audience development, marketing, communications and shaping the creative programme.



▲ **Sanjit Chudha**
© Sanjit Chudha

Commercial Success

Now, more than ever before, organisations across the culture sector need to develop more sustainable funding models as increasing demands are made on statutory funding.

We are delighted with the performance of our Commercial and Operations team over the financial year to the end of March. Our Conferencing and Events team earned £525,000 in royalties – breaking the £500k mark for the first time.

Our Retail team made £571,000 in the year just ended – a similar amount to 2019/20 when we had 1.3m visitors, almost twice as many as this year, so an amazing result.

Visitor numbers continued to increase over the past year, although we are still not at pre-pandemic figures. We welcomed a total of 739,036 across all sites in 2023/24, a 5% increase on the previous year.

Donations and grants play a vital role in supporting our sustainability so once again we extend our thanks to the Friends for your continued hard work, loyalty and support.

Protest Display

The newly developed Protest Display was launched on 14 March with a small reception in the People Gallery at M Shed. As one of the funders of the project, the Friends were represented by several committee members at the event. Short talks were given by Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, and Linda Coode, Head of Collections.

Prior to the event a smaller press launch was held attended by Bristol 24/7, The Bristol Post, and BBC Bristol among others. There has been both local and national press coverage of the display.

The National Lottery Heritage Fund have recently agreed to support our community engagement connected to the Protest Display with a grant to enable us to consult the community on future developments to the People Gallery, as well as run a series of events to promote the updated display.

Acquisitions

Thanks to your funding support, Bristol Archives were recently able to secure at auction nine drawings by the

notable Victorian architect/designer Edward William Godwin (1833-1886). These plans, dated 1866, won the initial contest for the design of the Bristol Assize Courts, but the council of the time insisted on a second competition which was won by a different architect, causing quite a controversy.

Godwin was born in Bristol and trained as an architect here before moving to London as an architect and theatre designer. He was also the creator of fine furniture, textiles, wallpaper, ceramics, and theatrical costumes. There will be a more detailed article on this acquisition in a future issue.



▲ **E. W. Godwin competition design for Bristol Assize Courts**
© Bristol Culture

Historic Houses

The Historic Houses – Blaise Museum, The Georgian House and The Red Lodge – have re-opened to the public for the summer season. Each house has slightly different opening schedules so please check opening times on the Bristol Museums website before visiting.

Volunteering

We are looking for volunteers to support Blaise Museum as well as various other roles across our sites. If you are interested in learning more about our volunteering opportunities, please contact Chloe Little at museum.volunteering@bristol.gov.uk.

Caroline Booth-Morris and Beth Cutter
Co-Development Managers

Exhibitions and Events

The Hay Wain

Constable's *Hay Wain*, on loan from the National Gallery, London, to mark the institution's 200th anniversary, will be on display at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery until 1 September 2024.

Driving fun

Have a Go steam locomotive and crane driving experiences have returned for 2024 and are running in the first week of July and the third week of October. For details see the What's On section of the M Shed website.

Pyronaut 90th

On 22/23 June there will be celebrations at M Shed for the 90th birthday of *Pyronaut*, the museum's floating fire appliance. *Pyronaut* will be demonstrating her capabilities throughout the weekend and will be joined by a vintage fire engine, a 1906 horse-drawn steam fire pump from the Duke of Beaufort's estate and on Saturday only by the Band of the Avon Fire and Rescue Service. The Friends will also be there selling home-made cakes to raise funds.

Museum at Night

This year's Museum at Night event will be on 20 June and will be themed around Constable's *Hay Wain* and landscapes. For details, check the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery website.

The World in Bristol

The World in Bristol returns on 14 September, celebrating the joyful diversity of the city and its many communities and will feature a mix of workshops, crafting activities, theatre, dance, poetry, food and more. Check the museum website nearer the time for details.

A word from the new director, Phil Walker

I am delighted to take up the post of Head of Culture and Creative Industries for Bristol City Council at a pivotal point as we move from an elected Mayor to the committee system (the transition to which we need to ensure goes as smoothly as possible!).

I have spent my first few weeks re-acquainting myself with the service and seeing where the pressures are and where the opportunities might be hiding, as well as meeting new and former colleagues to get the pulse of how the team and services are performing. I have been really impressed by the enduring passion and professionalism of the staff team after what has been a period of disruption and lack of consistent leadership. There is some excellent work – in some cases sector leading – going on across the teams. These teams include the Bristol Film Office, the Bottleyard Studios, UNESCO City of Film, Bristol Regional Environmental Records Centre, Bristol Archives, city-wide Arts Development



and the regional Museums Development South West – and of course the flagship museums in the city – M Shed, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Georgian House Museum, Red Lodge and Blaise Castle House Museum. I will be working to develop a clear strategic vision for the future direction of these services and provide the leadership that the team requires to flourish.

A brief re-cap on my background – starting out as an artist, I supplemented income working across Bristol's arts and cultural venues including Arnolfini, Watershed and At-Bristol (now We The Curious) and a couple of seasons at the Edinburgh fringe festival at a comedy venue. I have worked in numerous roles from Front of House, Education, Exhibitions, Curation, Programming and latterly management of marketing, design, operations, conservation and collections, leisure and tourism. I have experience in heritage, arts, festivals and have even run a cinema and live music venue and numerous listed heritage buildings. I contributed to the development of M Shed and supported gallery redisplays and have raised substantial income from funders and through tighter business models.

I am grateful to Sue Thurlow, Chair of the Friends, for the lovely write up/intro in the previous edition of this newsletter. I would add that I have enjoyed getting to know Sue over the years and believe we have a strong mutual respect. Sue has done much to modernise and her role in bringing two Friends groups together under one banner made good sense. I am pleased to see that this arrangement is working well, and I look forward to working with Sue and the Friends committee in my new role.

I am extremely grateful for the support of the Friends in the many campaigns, fundraising activities and advocacy that you all do on behalf of our wonderful museums. It is no secret that local authorities face real challenges to balance their budgets and Bristol is not immune from the pressures of adult social health care and temporary accommodation costs that councils are obliged to fund. This places non-statutory services at risk. However, I am keen not to retrench and reduce either the size or the ambition of the Culture and Creative Industries service. In fact, I am very keen to continue to develop our income streams, through further commercialisation where we can in order to thrive rather than just survive.

With the ongoing support of the Friends, we can continue to strengthen Bristol's position as the leading museum service in the SW and one of the top non-national museum services in the country.

Phil Walker Head of Culture and Creative Industries

Mary Carpenter's Photo Album

The Friends recently supported the acquisition of a photograph album that gives a fascinating insight into the social and intellectual life of Bristol in the 1860s. The dating is based on an analysis of the birth and death dates of all the known sitters. A note inside states that the album originally belonged to a sister of Jane Dowland Maggs (1833-1926), née Pickett, born Bristol St. George.

The album, spotted by retired Curator of Fine Art and Friends' Patron, Francis Greenacre, came up for sale at Chiswick Auctions in London and contains 46 small albumen photographic portraits with strong Bristol interest. The photographs, in *carte de visite* form, each about 3" x 2", include several images of Mary Carpenter (1807-1877), founder of the Red Lodge Reformatory School, as well as members of her family. The album also contains photos of the Lake, Maggs, Thomas and other families as well as 'celebrities' of the time.

Under Mary Carpenter's portrait a past owner has noted in pencil 'Important'. As readers may know, Mary Carpenter was the daughter of Lant Carpenter (1780-1840), the Unitarian Minister of the chapel in Lewin's Mead. Mary was a leading advocate of education for deprived children in mid-19th century England, and one of the first philanthropists to provide special facilities for their care. This she did at Red Lodge Reformatory School which opened in 1854. Mary oversaw the education of hundreds of girls aged 8 to 18 years of age in Bristol. Her main aim was to give young women skills that would allow them to gain employment as servants; however, she also encouraged them to explore personal expression through samplers and other artistic works. Mary Carpenter was based in Bristol from 1829 until her death at Red Lodge in 1877.

Included in the album are members of Mary Carpenter's family: her brother, the physician Dr William Benjamin Carpenter (1813-1885) and his sons, and Mary's



▲ Photograph album: Miss Mary Carpenter, Mrs H. Thomas

© Bristol Culture



▲ Photograph album: Mrs Budd and Dr. W. Budd

© Bristol Culture

NEW ACQUISITION

nephews, the Unitarian minister Joseph Estlin Carpenter (1844-1927) and soap-maker William Lant Carpenter (1841-1890). Pictured opposite Mary is Mrs H. Thomas, probably her younger sister Anna (1808-1870, née Carpenter) who married soap manufacturer, Herbert Thomas, and lived at 2 Great George Street. A photo on the next page depicts a Miss Annie Thomas, who may be their daughter, and therefore Mary's niece.

Another individual marked 'Important' is Dr William Budd (1811-1880), a doctor and epidemiologist who worked at the Bristol Royal Infirmary and is pictured in the album along with his wife. Budd campaigned to improve Bristol's water supply and is credited with dramatically reducing deaths from cholera in the city.

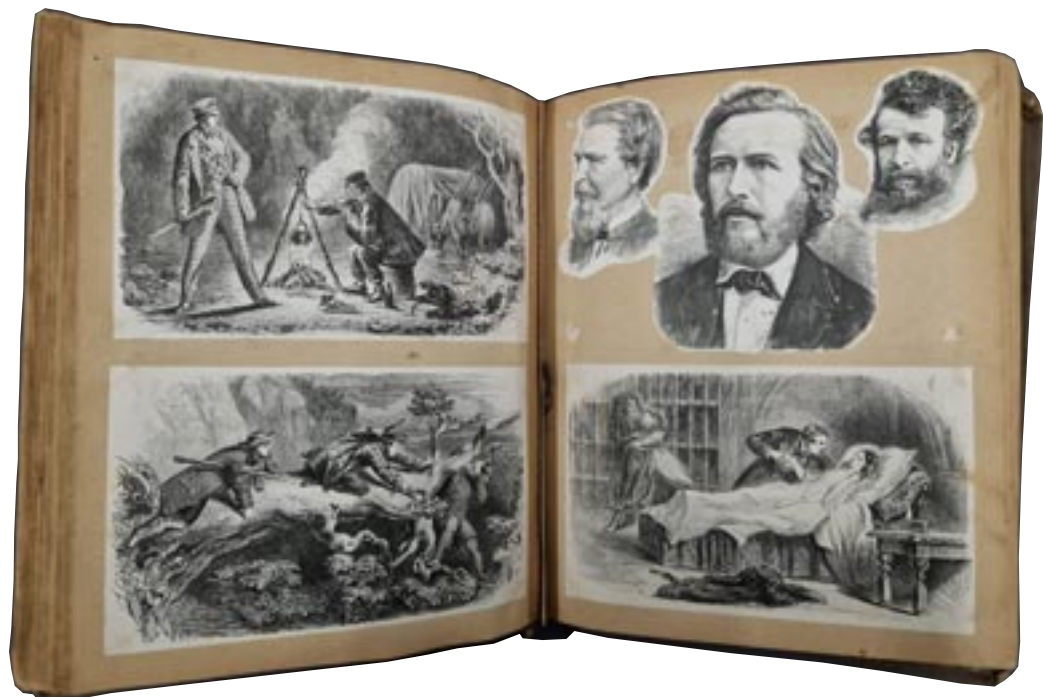
Members of the Friends may be able to help with information about the Lake family who feature in the album; including John Lake (possibly the John Lake born in Bristol, 1833-1888) and his wife Alice Lake (1846-1916), his parents, Mr and Mrs Lake - possibly Thomas Lake c.1798 - 1882 and Mary Ann Lake née Light, born 1795 who married in Bristol 1829. Samuel and Nellie Lake are also pictured. Other sitters in the album are the album's later owner Jane Dowland Maggs, née Pickett, and her daughter Mary and Anna Warren as children, Jenny Jackson and Lily and Ethel Potson. Please get in touch if you know anything about these individuals (kate.newnham@bristol.gov.uk).

The photographs of 'celebrities' point to the compiler of the album's interest in social reform and politics beyond Bristol with the inclusion of Liberal politicians William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898), Lord Palmerston (1784-1865), Scottish preacher and founder of Ragged Schools, Thomas Guthrie (1803-1873), Chartist and anti-slavery campaigner, Henry Vincent (1813-1878), as well as radical M.P. and anti-Corn Law campaigner, John Bright (1811-1889).

An interest in overseas exploration is represented by a photo of 'Captain Speake' - John Hanning Speke (born 1827 Bideford - died 1864 Corsham) an army officer and explorer who



▲ *Photograph album: Jane Dowland Maggs (1833-1926) and her daughter*
© Bristol Culture



▲ *Scrap book: mainly 1850s*
© Bristol Culture

undertook three expeditions in Africa, searching for the Great Lakes and the source of the Nile. There is also a photo of Cornish cleric John Colenso (1814-1883) who translated the Bible into Zulu and became the first Bishop of Natal in South Africa.

Some of the *cartes de visite* are by Scottish photographer John Beattie (1820-1883) who worked in Bristol from the 1850s. By 1861 until 1868 Beattie had a photographic business on The Triangle with assistant and later business partner Cyrus Voss Bark (1847-1913), today marked with a blue plaque.

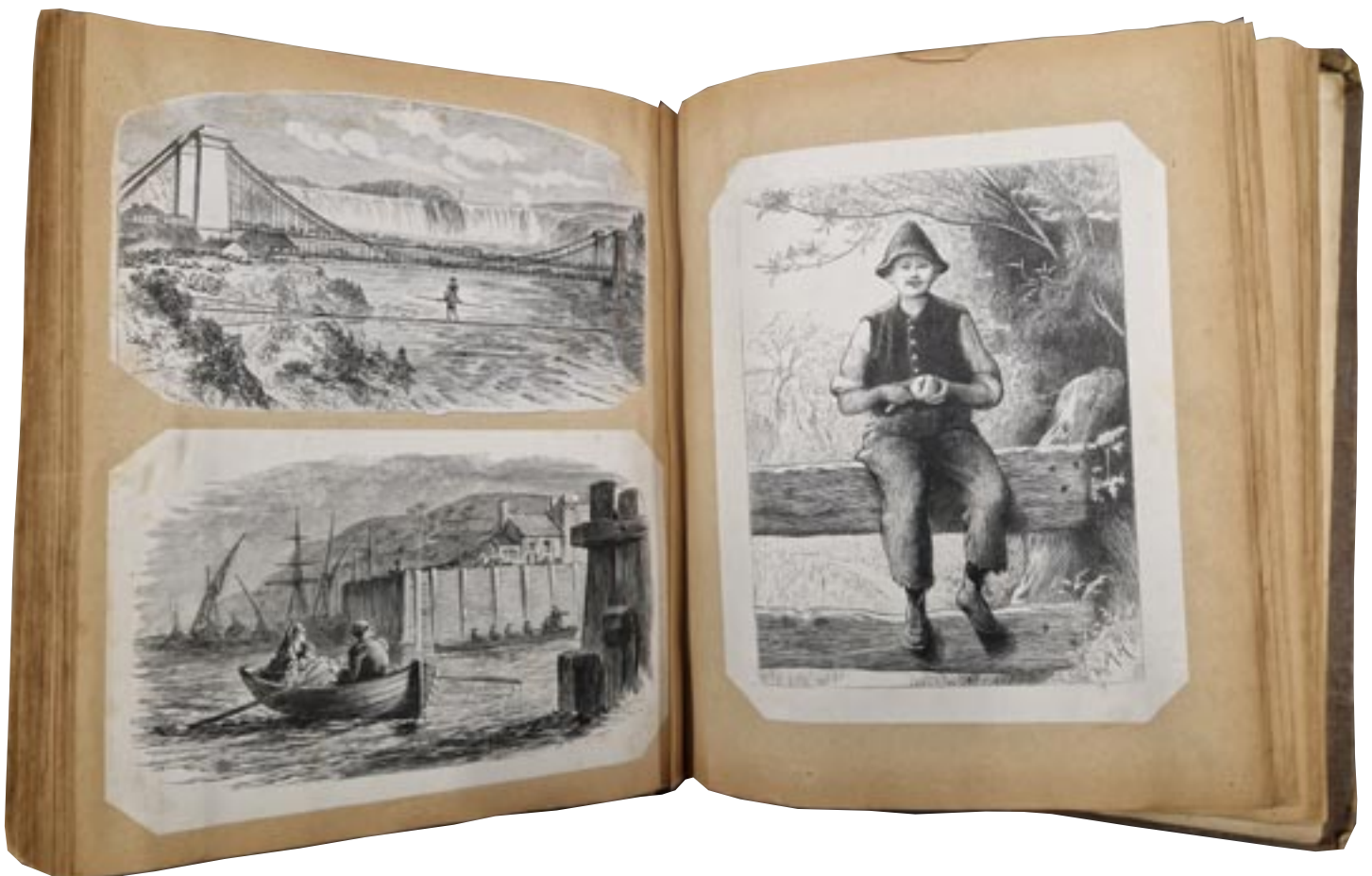
As an assemblage reflecting politics, social reform, faith and family ties, the photo album has the potential to unlock many stories about Bristol 150 years ago. It will be digitised to make the photos and associated history accessible to researchers. The album will also be a perfect candidate for temporary displays about Bristol history, for example at the Red Lodge. Thank you to the Friends, who enabled us to secure the album for Bristol at short notice, and to Francis Greenacre. Thanks also to Richard Hodder-Williams for biographical information about the Carpenter and Thomas families.

Included with the album at auction was a large scrap book with black and white illustrations cut and pasted from magazines. The earliest cutting is from the Saturday Magazine 1843; however, most date from the 1850s and include portraits of Queen Victoria, prints of natural history specimens, illustrations from romantic novels and news stories. Other prints that pin the compilation to the 1850s include depictions of the new Reading Room at the British Library completed 1857, and the suspension bridge at Niagara Falls, designed in 1851 by Edward W. Serrell who later offered to help complete the Clifton Suspension Bridge. The scrap book gives an interesting insight into the concerns and interests of a reader during the mid-Victorian period.

Kate Newnham Senior Curator, Visual Arts

▼ *Scrap book: Suspension bridge by Niagara Falls, designed 1851.*

© Bristol Culture





▲ The Hay Wain, John Constable
© National Gallery

‘The Hay Wain’ comes to town

Who can remember when they first saw *The Hay Wain* by John Constable? This 1821 landscape has become an icon of English, British, indeed international art history. Some would argue that it is an icon of England itself. In Constable's own lifetime Suffolk, the county where the famous scene was painted (and can still be seen, very much as it appears in Constable's picture) was overheard by the artist being described as ‘Constable country’.

We are therefore thrilled that this iconic painting has come to Bristol Museum & Art Gallery this summer. 2024 is the 200th anniversary of the National Gallery, London, and to mark it they have sent twelve of their greatest paintings to twelve museums and art galleries in the UK. Canaletto, Vermeer, Velasquez, Botticelli, Turner and more will be on tour to Aberystwyth, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Cambridge and Newcastle. *The Hay Wain* has come to Bristol, perhaps because of Bristol's own history of landscape art and the esteemed Bristol School of artists, including Francis Danby.

All twelve exhibitions opened simultaneously on 9 May. At Bristol Museum & Art Gallery we wanted to delve behind the icon to look at the story of the painting. Although well-received when it was shown at the Royal Academy the painting was not the huge splash we might imagine. It was purchased by a French dealer and was still in France when Constable died in 1837. It had a far more significant effect on French art of the time than in the UK.

Constable was a well-known artist in his lifetime and able to make a reasonable living from his painting, but his career as an artist was very different from that of his contemporary JMW Turner. (The two were acquainted and respected each other's work but they were not exactly friends – although they shared a stubborn focus on their art.) While Turner delivered lectures at the Royal Academy, Constable was not



▲ Willy Lott's House near Flatford Mill, oil sketch by John Constable
© Victoria and Albert Museum, given by Isabel Constable

made a Royal Academician until 1829 when he was in his 50s (beating Bristol's own Francis Danby in that year's election, much to Danby's anguish).

The Hay Wain is one of Constable's so-called 'six-footers': it is massive. What is more, he made a sketch in oil of the composition, also six foot wide. *The Hay Wain* was originally called *Landscape, Noon*. It shows a mill stream, a cottage and in the middle, an empty cart – the 'hay wain' – being led by two men across the stream back to the field behind to swap with the cart being loaded with hay in the distance. It is a scene of rural work in the place where Constable grew up. It was the humble subject, painted on such a grand scale, that was so novel to the English art establishment in 1821.

We have supplemented the generous loan from the National Gallery with eleven oil sketches by Constable from the V&A, including a sketch of *Willy Lott's cottage* (the building on the left of the Hay Wain) that Constable made ten years earlier.

In turn we are using the museum's extensive art collections to show the kind of art that Constable was looking at when he was learning his craft, and the art that he in turn would influence. We highlight the museum's collection of sixteenth-century Dutch landscape art, such as *River in Spate*, by Jacob van Ruisdael, contextualising it in the history of landscape. Danby and the Bristol School will be represented, as the generation following Constable. We show key examples of French painting from the collection in the light of Constable's achievement.

We also present modern and contemporary art, from Peter Lanyon's *High Moor*, depicting the salty damp windswept atmosphere of the Cornish landscape, along with Richard Long's *Delabole Slate Circle*. Long's ephemeral approach to the landscape, from his idea of a walking sculpture to bringing aspects of the land into the gallery, showed a recognition of the climate crisis as it was becoming evident to scientists and environmentalists over 50 years ago.

With National Treasure, Constable in Bristol, *Truth to Nature* we are showing the artists since before Constable's time who have approached the landscape in radical ways and how art can help us to understand and treasure our planet. We are presenting the exhibition across our three exhibition galleries in the museum: we look forward to seeing you there!

Julia Carver Curator, Art



▲ *The River in Spate*, Jacob van Ruisdael

© Bristol Culture

The exhibition – National Treasure, Constable in Bristol *Truth to Nature* is on at Bristol Museum & Art Gallery from 11 May – 1 September 2024

▼ *High Moor*, Peter Lanyon

© the artist



▲ *Delabole Slate Circle*, Richard Long

© the artist



Nantgarw China Works Museum

Wednesday 8 November 2023

It was an early start in November 2023, especially for those joining the coach at Nailsea, as our special day visit to the museum began at 10.30am with coffee and Welsh cakes. We were then treated to an illustrated talk on the history of the Works, focussing on the products of William Billingsley. He had spent time at Nantgarw in two periods in the early 19th century. His particular claim to fame was the creation of a special recipe for making porcelain. This produced wares regarded as the whitest and most translucent available. Henry Sandon, who for a long time was the pottery expert on the BBC's 'Antiques Roadshow', described Nantgarw as 'the finest porcelain in the world'.

Unfortunately damage during the production process of porcelain is quite high and in the case of Billingsley's product very much so, with over 90% being lost in the kilns. This meant that the economics of the venture were poor, not helped by Billingsley's complete lack of business acumen. As a result, the porcelain factory did not survive, perfect pieces are quite rare, and collectors pay high prices to acquire them. All of Billingsley's pieces were produced 'in the white' but others took them and decorated them. We were told about Thomas Pardoe, a skilled porcelain painter from Bristol who for the last three years of his life (1820-23) worked at Nantgarw decorating the white wares that had been left behind by Billingsley, who had made a swift departure for the Coalport China factory. Pardoe was a specialist in calligraphy and gilding, and it is likely that others will have sometimes done the painting with Pardoe subsequently adding the gilding. Porcelain wares decorated by Pardoe were on display in a special exhibition.

The pottery continued to be run by the Pardoe family and converted to more mundane products such as clay pipes, finally shutting down in 1920. We were taken on a tour of the site, which is now a scheduled ancient monument. Various buildings exist, in varying states of repair. The original base of a four-fire bottle kiln from the 1890s remains, the top of which was rebuilt in the 1990s. There were remnants of a two-storey kiln and of a six-fire one, which would have produced the hotter temperatures required for the salt glaze wares produced in the latter years of operation. There were also the remains of the original steam



▲ 19th century bottle kiln at Nantgarw

▼ Nantgarw House, now the museum.



▲ Example of a plate decorated by Billingsley with his signature roses





▶ Lupin demonstrating
mould-making

Photos by Mary and
Martin Bailey and
Sheila Round

▼ Samples of 19th century
clay pipes made at
Nantgarw

boiler for the pipe-drying room and we were told that Cadw (the Welsh version of English Heritage) was investigating it.

The pottery owner's house, now home to the museum, is Grade II listed and the immediate outbuildings are still in use producing various wares and running workshops for budding and more experienced potters; one on decorating was in session on the day of our visit. We met Lupin, the mould-maker, who was also producing contemporary styled mugs and coffee pots. Sally, the slip caster, showed us how she uses moulds from Lupin to create porcelain items, using a similar recipe to that of Billingsley. Items produced by both of them were on sale in the museum shop. The museum itself had a fine selection of white and decorated wares produced at the site as well as photographs and other memorabilia of the pottery when it was in full production.

A fascinating and instructive day out, thoroughly enjoyed by all participants.

Richard Avery



▶ Teacup and plate decorated
with Billingsley's famous roses



▶ Nantgarw
pottery
19th century
earthenware
bottles



STEAM Swindon

Tuesday 19 March 2024

Housed in a beautifully restored grade II listed building, STEAM - the Museum of the Great Western Railway in Swindon - is located at what was once one of the largest railway engineering works in the world. Swindon Railway Works opened in January 1843 as a repair and maintenance facility for the new Great Western Railway (GWR) that linked Bristol and London. By 1900 the works employed over 12,000 people. At its peak in the 1930s, the site covered more than 300 acres and produced up to three new locomotives per week. The last steam locomotive produced at Swindon was in 1960. The works finally closed in 1986.

There is a great deal to see in the museum, including historical exhibits where we could meet Isambard Kingdom Brunel, see workers making locomotives and visit a station complete with platform, typical station buildings, such as a ticket office and waiting rooms, and a traditional picket fence.

STEAM tells the social history of the railway community at Swindon works, with recorded personal experiences and film archives. It also tells the history of the GWR and the work of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Victorian engineer who masterminded the construction of the GWR. There are exhibits, interactive displays and films explaining the



▲ Exterior of the STEAM Museum
© STEAM Museum 2024

▼ No 6000 King George V wearing the headboard of the *Bristolian* – the passenger train service that connected London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads.

© Photo on Loan from the National Railway Museum, 2024





▲ *Replica of The North Star broad gauge locomotive, built at Swindon Works in 1837.*

© Photo on loan from the National Railway Museum, 2024



▲ *Official string used by staff of the GWR, printed at intervals along its length with Great Western Railway*

© Sue Thurlow

construction of locomotives, railway equipment and the railway itself. It is possible to go into an inspection pit under one of the locomotives and there is one stand where one can 'drive' a locomotive oneself! There are reconstructions of areas of work, such as offices, stores, workshops, foundries and a complete signal box. The museum holds an extensive collection of books, photographs, drawings and plans relating to the GWR.

As well as the Railway Museum the former engineering works site is the location of a Designer Outlet Store (which a number of our party also visited after the museum!), the headquarters of the National Trust (the Heelis Building) and the offices of English Heritage.

Of course there were several famous and important locomotives on display. We were able to walk round them and climb into the driving cabs of some. Probably the oldest on display was the North Star which in 1838 was the first locomotive to run on the GWR broad gauge tracks from Paddington to Maidenhead. It hauled an inaugural train full of GWR directors and other dignitaries.

There are several examples of locomotives built at Swindon works on display at STEAM. These included the GWR 6000, King George V, built at Swindon in 1927. The King Class locomotives were the most powerful used on the GWR.

Many thanks to Richard Avery for organising this enjoyable and memorable visit!

Brian Vincent



▲ *The inspection pit under King George V showing details of the underside of the locomotive*

© Sue Thurlow

To learn more about STEAM visit www.steam-museum.org.uk
To learn more about the locomotives visit
www.steam-museum.org.uk/collection/locomotives/ and the National Railway Museum

Circomedia

Friday 15 March 2024

The unique imposing edifice of this Georgian church, with its breathtaking spacious interior, must have been the pride of fashionable Portland Square's residents when construction was completed in 1794. This was evident by the long list of benefactors on the northeast wall. The last of these being Mrs John Bush who gave £1,000 towards the endowment of the Benefice in 1923. Subsequent dwindling congregations finally led to the church's closure in 1988, and the following years of neglect finally prompted the Churches Conservation Trust in 2001 to undertake complete restoration and renovation so that Circomedia was able to lease and occupy the lofty space by 2005. Two years later the Trust won an international RICS Community Benefit Award for this exceptional transformation and happily it continues to be responsible for the building's management today.

Visitors can still appreciate the soaring pillars, the richness of the stained-glass windows, especially that of the east window, and the delicate ornate plasterwork on the ceiling, as well as glimpsing the splendid marble Vassall Memorial of 1809 in the chancel behind the gymnastic equipment of the circus. Our patient guide provided answers to many questions and a few of us tackled a short distance up the winding stone staircase to access the bell chamber where the remaining tenor bell hangs. The tower had been designed to house ten bells but only four were ever acquired and later these were dispersed for use in other churches following St Paul's closure.

We were to learn the short but prestigious history of Circomedia (Academy for Contemporary Circus and Physical Theatre) unmatched anywhere else in this country, perhaps in Europe. I quote from the prospectus: 'Circomedia's Academy offers a comprehensive range of courses tailored to students of all ages, providing a unique and enriching educational experience. With a history deeply rooted in the circus and physical theatre arts since 1993, we are committed to fostering creativity innovation and skill development.'

We had entered St Paul's by the west door and shortly settled on widely-dispersed benches at the edges of a magnificent maple wood sprung floor. If there had been music, we would have been tempted to get up and dance! Instead, we helped ourselves to coffee and shortly our speaker and host appeared. He introduced himself as the leader of Circomedia's events team. His tall, athletic figure and tight knot of hair seemed appropriate. He informed us of the very wide range of technical and physical courses available for students from the age of three to adult, some of the older ones seeking BTEC, FdA (foundation diploma/degree in the arts), BA and MA qualifications. There are classes for all ages in the flying trapeze, silk rope skills, acrobatics and the hoop. Short vocational courses without formal qualification are also available. The academic courses are shared with City of Bristol College and/or Bath Spa University.

There are a growing number of opportunities for employment in the circus and the entertainment industry as a whole, embracing exciting creativity. Students from Circomedia may be encountered in theatrical and circus management throughout Europe and North America.

Circomedia funding is complex. It became a registered charity in 1994 and receives a small regular grant from the Arts Council. Funding in all forms is crucial to providing this exceptional space for a plethora of activities. Entertainment of every kind may be seen here: regular dance and gymnastic classes; the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School runs performances for a week or so each year; parties and celebration gatherings are welcome. Audiences can number up to 148.



▲ *Circolombia at Circomedia during Circus City Festival*
© Simon Abel

The church is still consecrated and as such conventional C of E weddings are sometimes performed when the vicar of nearby St. Agnes Church may officiate. Civil weddings can also take place, the local registrar leading the service.

This year is the 30-year anniversary of Circomedia and there is a wide-ranging programme on offer to mark this milestone of success. The highlight was the Spring Gala on 23 March when a £100 ticket bought an evening of glamour and spectacular entertainment. We were given the opportunity of purchasing tickets for the 'exceptional' raffle before we departed.

So, our curiosity for the secret of 'The Wedding Cake Church' had been assuaged; another obscure and innovative business revealed, just a little part of cosmopolitan Bristol. Many thanks to Carol Ouvry and Katherine Martin for organising such an interesting visit.

Mary Magro



▲ *Circolombia at Circomedia during Circus City Festival*
© Simon Abel

Visit www.circomedia.com to see images and video of the students in action and the classes available for any of you wishing to train for the circus!

Painswick Rococo Garden

Friday 16 February 2024

On a bright spring day, a group of 42 Friends and guests set off to visit the Rococo Garden at Painswick to enjoy the famous display of snowdrops at their best.

Painswick House was built in the 1730s by Charles Hyett, possibly to escape the smog of Gloucester where he was a prominent citizen. Sadly, Charles died in 1738 shortly after moving there. The garden was designed in the 1740s by his son, Benjamin Hyett, in the currently fashionable fanciful and exuberant Rococo style.

The Grade II listed garden is a kind of outdoor 'room' furnished with plants, fascinating follies and wonderful views of the surrounding landscape. Over the centuries the garden was redesigned, eventually abandoned to woodland in the 1950s, then restored in the 1980s. Its current restoration programme is planned and executed by an independent trust.

Our visit to this beautiful garden did not disappoint. We were blessed with a glorious sunny day, if a little chilly. After a slightly prolonged journey through the Bristol morning traffic, we were able to enjoy delightful countryside and splendid views as we approached the garden. Aconites greeted us at the gates and, after a brief introduction by a garden guide who came on to the coach, we were free to wander around the garden for a few hours. Because of the current restoration work, facilities and catering were very limited at the site but, notwithstanding this, we enjoyed lovely walks through the garden. The sometimes steep and winding woodland paths led us through great swathes of many varieties of snowdrops, traditionally symbolic of new beginnings, hope and rebirth. On such a beautiful day it certainly felt like it. The follies in the garden, some housing the garden shops, were a bonus and, in the sunlight, occasionally a visual treat.

Despite the very limited facilities at present, those of us who chose to eat in the marquee enjoyed cheerful service and wholesome food. The plant nursery was in itself a delight and several of us came away with pots of snowdrops.

It was a most enjoyable day, and our thanks go to Richard Avery for organising it.

Stella Berkeley



▲ *The Hornbeam Tunnel*
Photo by Richard Avery

M Shed

Thursday 16 November 2023

Go past the lecture room and meeting rooms on the first floor of M Shed and through the next double doors is a vast warehouse crammed, seemingly, with all the debris of Bristol's industrial past. However, the first exhibit, recumbent and with his face lightly covered in red paint, is the statue of Edward Colston, slaver and city benefactor. Our guide, Martin, gave a very balanced view of his history and his future. There is also preserved there all the placards accompanying the protest which led to the toppling of the statue. Because they are ephemeral, work will be done to preserve them.

At the other end of the huge room is the splendid Lord Mayor's coach carefully wrapped in plastic. In between what is there not? Huge lumps of machinery of one kind or another; a box of model boats about two inches long of every vessel in Bristol harbour made by a local wine merchant; a typewriter with two keyboards – one the normal Qwerty and the other with mathematical symbols and the Greek alphabet; a board with five holes for children to show their faces as the celebrated Fry's Five Boys. One thing I never expected to see again was a barrel of tobacco which, as a student 65 years ago, I 'bumped up' onto shelves in one of the large tobacco bonds where the tobacco was stored prior to being taxed.

There was an ordinary bicycle with an engine slung below its crossbar and behind it, only 24 years between them, a full-blown motorcycle looking very much as we know them today. We also saw every kind of bicycle from the penny-farthing to a newer bike, the saddle of which moved up and down with the rider.

There was the pan in which the lead shot was gathered as it fell from the top of the first shot-tower constructed by the inventor who extended his own house upwards and downwards to provide the drop which converts falling drops of metal into perfect spheres. The first shot-tower fell foul of developers. The current one is still there.

We are very grateful to Martin, who managed to produce some sense of order out of all the chaos, and to Carol Ouvry for organising the trip.

Robert Walters



▲ A Dursley Pedersen gentleman's chain-driven cantilever frame safety bicycle, made in Dursley in 1906.



▲ A 2-cylinder 350cc Douglas CW25 motorcycle built by Douglas Motors Ltd in Kingswood in 1925. Square section petrol tanks were popular in the 1920s.

Photos by Roni Edwards

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