

Newsletter

**A visual feast of post war sculpture at the Museum.
Disturbing? Tortured? Beautiful? You decide!**



This edition packed with

- news and photos of Bristol's museums, galleries and archives including developments at our historic houses; exhibitions of Homes for Heroes, Being Human, Wildlife Photographer of the Year and the last chance to see Extinction Voices
- reports of trips to Malta, Powderham Castle, The Vyne, the Bath Soft Cheese Factory, Limbs and Things, Weston Park, Clifton Vaults and a cruise in the Floating Harbour
- news of upcoming events, talks and visits you can join

**December 2019
Issue 207**

From the Chairman

Annual General Meeting

I was pleased to see a good number of members at the AGM in October at M Shed. We kept the formalities snappy as promised, and had a mix of entertainment afterwards with interesting short illustrated talks from members of the museum team and a film from the archives, all linked to purchases the Friends had funded in some way or might be asked to help with in future. I found it particularly fascinating to look at some of the tobacco advertising ephemera that Andy King had brought with him, collected largely via eBay at no great cost. You may remember we featured our funding of that on page 2 of our March 2019 Newsletter. We closed the evening chatting over drinks and nibbles with staff, committee members and other Friends old and new.

British Association of Friends of Museums Annual Conference 2019

This year's BAFM Conference in October was hosted by Friends of Reading Museum. The theme was Museum Friends & Community Engagement: Challenge & Opportunity, and we were treated to some very interesting speakers including the local MP, Matt Rodda, and two visitors from Dusseldorf museum, which is twinned with Reading. For me the quote of the conference came from the BAFM president Dame Rosemary Butler, previously the speaker of the Welsh parliament: "The museums you remember are those where you're met with a smile".

Winter lectures

The Museum's winter lecture series is now in full swing, having started in September with a great talk by an expert speaker from the V&A on the subject of Kimonos. The title of the next talk, on 5 December, is 'Cosmochemistry – geology meets space science' with renowned local speaker Tim Gregory from the University of Bristol. You will find the practical details in our Events calendar enclosed, and on the Museum's What's On webpages. The lectures are held in a comfortable state-of-the-art theatre, and are free (with a voluntary collection afterwards), so you can simply turn up, with no need to book. If you put them in your diary now you can simply decide on the day whether or not to come.

Trip to the William Blake Exhibition at Tate Britain

As usual, you will find enclosed booking details for all the wonderful variety of tours, trips and talks that the Events Group has planned for us. One in particular caught my eye, the trip on 6 January to see the Blake Exhibition at the Tate Britain.

Cover photo: Moon Figure by Kenneth Armitage. It is one of the sculptures in the *Being Human* exhibition. It was purchased in 1966 with the help of the Friends of Bristol Art Gallery and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

Although I came from an artistic family I was never one of the arty crowd at school, but I do remember how infatuated they were with Blake. At the time that pretty much passed me by but now I understand rather better what an inspiration he was to my teenage peers: radical, rebellious, and talented in the visual arts, music and poetry – in fact everything they aspired to be themselves. It looks like an exciting exhibition, including realising Blake's dream of showing some of his works at enormous scale, using technology even Blake himself would never have imagined.

Sue Thurlow Chairman



▲ William Blake 'Europe' Plate I: Frontispiece, *The Ancient of Days* 1827
© The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

Volunteer needed for our annual Gift Aid claim

Each year we are able to claim Gift Aid (currently over £3,000) from HM Revenue and Customs. This is because many members have signed Gift Aid declarations in respect of their subscriptions and donations. The volunteer who has dealt with our Gift Aid claim since 2010 feels it is time to pass this on, so we are now looking for someone to take over. The role involves taking the data provided by the Membership Secretary, creating a spreadsheet in HMRC format, then submitting an online claim, together with our claim under the Small Donations Scheme, as soon as possible after the tax year-end on 5 April. This could require up to 12 hours per year initially (mostly in April) as you 'learn the ropes', but should be less in subsequent years.

The role will suit someone who is comfortable with sorting data on a spreadsheet and working through the HMRC online submission. A set of step-by-step instructions has been prepared to guide you through the process, and there will be transitional support from the existing volunteer.

If you're interested in helping the Friends by taking on this role please talk to me when you see me or phone me on 07836693589 or email me on suethurlow@waitrose.com.

Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives

Service-wide developments

DCMS have announced a new cultural investment fund of £250m, of which £125m will be set aside for the upkeep of regional museums and libraries. This has followed a campaign by several national museum bodies to raise awareness of the need across the country for investment in ageing museum buildings. Bristol Museum & Art Gallery was selected as one example (although the reporting in *The Times* for example was very inaccurate and plain wrong in places). An application process is being put in place so we can bid for some of this money to improve maintenance at our buildings.

Regardless of the new money mentioned above, work is ongoing at the Museum & Art Gallery throughout this winter to replace the roofs over both main halls in the building. This entails building a 'crash deck' between the internal ceiling and the actual roof in each hall. As a consequence, the light levels are somewhat reduced, but the end result will be watertight roofs.

The Bottle Yard Studios (part of Culture & Creative Industries) continue to attract investment into the city. You may recently have been watching the TV adaptation of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, which has been filmed at the studios and on location in the city, including in some of our museum sites.

Staff news

Philip Walker (Head of Engagement) has left us on a 12-month secondment to Gloucester City Council as Interim Head of Culture. Alex Hardy (Volunteer Coordinator) has left for pastures new in London. Congratulations to Linda Gordon (Senior Curator Historic Houses – maternity cover) on her recent marriage.



▲ Young people from St Werburgh's City Farm were inspired by the *Natural Selection* exhibition to weave a swing seat from willow

© Jamie Woodley

Extinction Voices – last chance to see

Over the summer *Extinction Voices* was installed into the World Wildlife Gallery. This was in response to letters received after a school visit where the children felt the museum was not doing enough, in the way that it is displayed, to recognise that the tiger is under threat of extinction. In a very simple but effective move, black veils were hung over the animals in the displays at greatest risk of extinction or indeed those already extinct. Better than any label, this has brought home what the Biodiversity Crisis actually means to visitors – that all sorts of familiar creatures are doing very badly out in the wild. There has been an amazing response from visitors, many of whom have been moved by the experience and in addition this idea has been copied and reproduced all around the UK and further afield. This impactful display is on until 15 December.

Natural Selection exhibition

In the summer our *Natural Selection* exhibition by Andy Holden and Peter Holden, a meditation on nest-building and egg-collecting by artist son and ornithologist father, clearly captured the imaginations of our visitors, of which there were almost 60,000. Evaluation was 98% positive with comments such as 'Wonderful, artistic, magical'.

Alongside the exhibition there was a fantastic programme of engagement, reaching 1,760 participants including after school clubs at the city farms, scouts and cubs from Henbury, and Asian elders learning about botany on the gorge.

M Shed and Working Exhibits

Work continues on locomotive *Henbury* and steam tug *Mayflower*, and the Council is preparing to carry out major works on the Chocolate Path alongside the New Cut, which will eventually lead to the reinstatement of the Harbour Railway down to A Bond in the Cumberland Basin.

Blaise Castle House Museum, Georgian House Museum and Red Lodge Museum

The Yoko Ono exhibition at Georgian House, *Interventions/2*, has seen visitor figures rise for this site and is an interesting experiment on how old and new can be combined together. It continues until 31 December.

The volunteer gardeners at the Red Lodge Knot Garden have been struggling to contain the ravages of the recently arrived Box Tree Moth, a native of Asia, the caterpillars of which have been chomping their way through box hedges as they have across England. Our eagle-eyed volunteers and staff have been picking off the camouflaged larvae.

Work is ongoing in deciding changes to displays at Blaise for the 2020 season, continuing our exploration of what

visitors would like to see happen in the building in future. Do make a point of visiting next spring after we reopen from 1 April to see the next stages of this work.

Bristol Archives

Bristol Archives published the city's Anglican parish registers on ancestry.com in September, with over 2.6 million births, baptisms and burials now fully searchable online. Non-conformist registers will be published before the end of the year.

The Unlocking Our Sound Heritage team have now been digitising and cataloguing sound archives for a full year. They recently completed 250 oral histories from Bristol Reference Library - around 200 interviews with working-class Bristolians born in the late 19th/early 20th century, plus 48 people's experiences of the Bristol Blitz.

The British Empire & Commonwealth Collection team have a one-year contract underway to digitise key films from the archive - as a result, over 180 film clips are now available on the Getty films website, to generate income for the collections.

Exhibitions and Events

Do you believe in magic?

Bristol Museum & Art Gallery
to 19 April 2020. Pay what you think.

Our major winter exhibition features over 200 fascinating objects and stories that reveal how magic has been used to heal, hunt and harm across the world. From ancient uses of witchcraft, to belief in the power of gods and ancestors, this exhibition explores the complex intersection between magic, science and religion.

Extraordinary artefacts have been carefully selected from our collections, including European works of art, North American shamanic artefacts, magical animals, delicately-preserved plants, beautiful clothing and spiritual figurines.

From Ancient Egyptian amulets and Mexican charms promising protection, to items collected from the altar of a practising witch, the exhibition uncovers new ways of understanding worlds beyond our own.

Being Human: An exhibition of modern sculpture
Bristol Museum & Art Gallery to October 2020

Can art capture what it is to be human? This exhibition explores how sculptors have grappled with the human form

Presenting work from Bristol's collection, this exhibition is a powerful visual feast by a significant group of artists. Their work focuses on themes of beauty, identity, sexuality and existential angst in the aftermath of war.

We have been able to produce an accompanying catalogue, available to buy in the museum shop, thanks to Clara Hudson, Angela Sansom and Sansom & Company publishers in memory of John Sansom.

Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2019
M Shed, to 4 May 2020

The world-renowned wildlife photography exhibition from the



▲ **Help by Bernard Meadows from Being Human**
©Bristol Culture

Natural History Museum is back with 100 new images. Now in its 55th year, Wildlife Photographer of the Year presents the most arresting and spectacular photography of our natural world. It is the most prestigious photography event of its kind, providing a global platform that showcases the world's most astonishing sights for more than 50 years.

Hillfields Homes for Heroes

Bristol Archives: to 18 January 2020

Hillfields is home to the first post-First World War council houses built in Bristol. This exhibition uncovers and celebrates the history of the area.

Dementia Friendly Programme

We have now completed the third series of Creative Cafes funded by Heritage Lottery Funding. There can be the assumption that paintings with a clear narrative are more appropriate and accessible to people living with dementia, but our experience is that people also become very engaged with the movement, colour and rhythm in abstract paintings.

Young People – Uncomfortable Truths

We have worked with students from UWE to design a trail for Bristol Museum & Art Gallery that highlights the objects on display that have challenging histories. The objects include a Benin bronze head, an Egyptian mummy, and a taxidermy rhino. The trail will introduce our visitors to some of the uncomfortable truths that have been hidden in our collections.

Volunteering at the museums

We recently gathered together our end of year volunteer statistics for 2018 / 2019. It was another good year and nice to see an increase in diversity within our active volunteers. It is very obvious that we have good links with our local universities as 64% of our volunteers are aged between 20 and 34 years old.

Figures for 2018/2019:

Total Volunteers – 940

Total Volunteer Hours – 45,348

Black Asian & Minority Ethnic heritage – 27%

Disabled – 7%

Trip to Malta

We escaped the gloom of Britain for a sunny and warm week in Malta, an island packed with so much history that we barely scratched the surface of it. There were some challenges for us: the new technology of audio sets (Whispers), which worked most of the time but not in the narrow streets of old Valletta and Mdina when the group was walking mostly in single file; the 3-course set lunches each day in addition to breakfast and dinner; the rapid-fire delivery of our local guide, Romina, which made some of the information she gave us difficult to hear. However, by the end of our stay we realised the strategic importance of Malta in the Mediterranean from prehistory to the present day: a small island with a huge history.

Mary Bailey

Wednesday 2 October

Visit to Valletta

State rooms of the Grand Masters of the Order of St John

This was probably the first private house in Valletta, built in 1569 and enlarged into a palace by Girolamo Cassar. It is now part museum and part municipal building. We were impressed by the grandeur of the rooms with frescoes of the Great Siege of Malta and the Gobelin tapestries, *Les Teintures des Indes*, showing many exotic beasts and birds. We were interested to discover that, since independence, Malta had had two women heading the government in Valletta. The Queen's portrait will probably be removed to accommodate the next incumbent. Most of the names sounded very Italian but that was unsurprising, as there has been considerable migration at various times between Malta and Sicily.

Armoury

The armoury, housed in the former stables, was beautifully laid out and vast. We were amazed by the size of a Roman anchor similar to the one St Paul's boat would have used when he was shipwrecked. I was impressed with the horse armour and the 14th century Brigantine armour, which was made up of small pieces of metal jointed together over a leather base and gilded nail heads, covered in a velvet waistcoat. There was a lot of interest in the merits of stone and metal cannon balls, as that part of the warm gallery was cooled by a strategically placed electric fan!

St John's Co-Cathedral

The cathedral was built in 1577 after Malta was besieged by the Turks and the Grand Master de la Cassiere hurriedly moved his headquarters from Birgu to Valletta. It became a co-cathedral to the older one in Mdina in 1816.

Outside, a clock with three faces on one side of a tower gave the day, the date and the time – impressive, albeit not quite correct. Inside, being used to the relative austerity of northern European cathedrals, we were taken aback at the amount of gilding on the walls. The floor was covered in memorials of knights in polychrome marble on which, surprisingly, we were able to walk. Above us was an immense barrel-vaulted ceiling, which some of our companions viewed in more detail from a gallery.

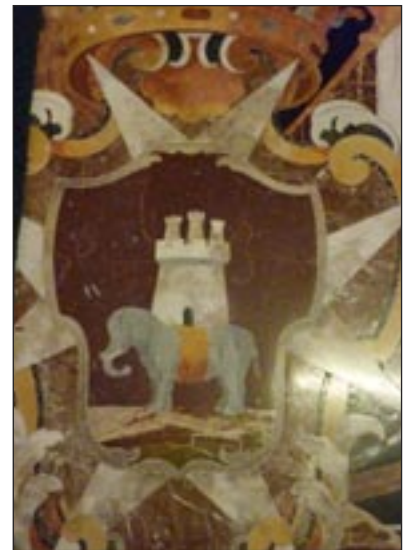
There were chapels for the various langues, or chapters of knights, in the side aisles. We were fascinated that when Napoleon invaded Malta the custodians had the foresight to protect the solid silver screen and gates in one chapel from pillage with black paint! There were too many art treasures to list but there are two paintings by Caravaggio in the oratory. A condition of Caravaggio's one-year stay in Malta was that he should paint a picture for the cathedral. The *Beheading of St John the Baptist* was the result; a picture of St Jerome hangs opposite.

The National Museum of Archaeology

In one short visit to the National Museum of Archaeology we were introduced to all the historic periods of Malta's history that would become very familiar to us in the following days. The museum is housed in one of the auberges which were built for the Knights of the Order of St John – this one for the knights from Provence. Built in 1571, the architecture is baroque, and the Grand Salon in particular is very impressive. It was being refurbished, but we were able to get a glimpse of its richly painted walls and could imagine the knights meeting and feasting there.



▲ Savoyard-Style Close Helmet c1600-1630 in the Armoury



▲ The floor of the Cathedral was composed almost entirely of the tombs of the Knights of St John in the form of complex mosaics which were all different

The knights were recent visitors in Malta's rich history, which stretches back to around 5200 BC. People arrived on the island in Neolithic times, probably from Sicily, and, until around 3600 BC lived unremarkable lives. Then they started building temples – massive stone structures older than the pyramids and Stonehenge – which we became very familiar with as the week progressed. In the museum we could see some of the artefacts found in them; my favourite was the sleeping woman because it is so natural and beautifully carved in stone and has a solid presence. She really is asleep.

Thursday 3 October

Rabat and Mdina

We started the day with a visit to Mdina, the old capital city of Malta, and its newer suburb Rabat. Above ground Rabat seems unremarkable but beneath some churches are catacombs dating back to the 3rd century AD. These were used for burials for around 500 years. We visited St Paul's Catacombs, a labyrinth of rock-cut tombs, narrow stairs and passages which covers an area of over 2,000 square metres.

The catacombs were originally lit by Aladdin-style oil lamps and fragments of these along, with terracotta statuettes and 'teardrop' perfume bottles, have been found. The shrouded bodies, treated with oils and perfume, were placed into tombs cut either into the walls or into the ground rock. Tombs were covered with terracotta or stone lids. Personal possessions were included but most have been looted. During World War II the catacombs were used as bomb shelters.

St Paul's Cathedral

From the catacombs we walked up to the heavily-fortified city of Mdina, across the bridge and through the impressive gateway into a maze of narrow winding streets with a mixture of mediaeval and baroque buildings.

The main square is dominated by St Paul's cathedral, the first Catholic cathedral in Malta, founded in the 12th century which, according to tradition, stands on the site where the Roman Governor Publius met St Paul following his shipwreck on Malta. The original cathedral was severely damaged in 1693 by an earthquake. It was rebuilt in the Baroque style by the Maltese architect, Lorenzo Gafa and is regarded as his masterpiece.

Outside are two bell towers and two clock faces – one telling the time, the other the date. We entered through the original carved wooden doors. Inside it is less elaborately decorated than the co-cathedral of St John's in Valletta. Ceiling paintings depict the life of St Paul. On the pillars either side of the altar are St Peter and St Paul. At first glance these look like paintings but on closer inspection are mosaics. Paintings behind the altarpiece depict St Paul's shipwreck and his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus.

Hagar Qim and Mnajdra Temples

After the customary sit-down lunch we coached to Hagar Qim and Mnajdra. Here we found four megalithic structures built in different periods from 3600 BC, which make Stonehenge and the Pyramids rather junior arrivals on the Neolithic Grand Tour. The temples were discovered and excavated in the 19th century, and are recognised as the oldest freestanding structures on Earth. They are now protected from further weathering by transparent shallow domes. Built on the crest of a ridge with commanding views over the open sea, Hagar Qim's surviving plan is a main building with a series of linked semi-circular chambers, formed of awe-inspiringly heavy limestone slabs, including one monumental 20 tonne megalith on the exterior wall. 'Porthole' doorways into the chambers were cut from single megaliths and an elliptical hole at the end of one apse probably marks the summer solstice sunrise. It is uncertain if all the chambers were covered but there is evidence that some had corbelled roofs.

The immediate question is, as always with these relics, how did they shape, dress, manoeuvre and fit (astonishingly accurately) these massive pieces? All is theory and speculation from the experts, but spherical stones on the site are thought to be early ball-bearings on which the titanic stones were rolled.

We walked 500m down a gently-sloping path to a second temple complex at Mnajdra. A shuttle buggy was available - free to ride down; one euro to ride up! Our admiration for the builders increased when we saw the massive size of the slabs they used to construct the temple.

There are three temples on this lower site, erected (I kid you not) in the Ggantija Phase of pre-



▲ *Inside the Rabat catacombs showing the carved chambers*



▲ *The porthole slab entrance to a temple chamber at Mnajdra*



▲ Door knockers were a big thing in Mdina and they took all forms

history – so named because early discoverers believed they were built by giants. In the central temple, one megalith holds a sketch design which is held to be the world's oldest architectural drawing. Astronomy played its inevitable part, as doorways and openings admit the sun's rays at sunrise on the solstices and equinoxes to strike particular stones. We did not wait to verify this.

The afternoon's experience was truly impressive. We slowly climbed the hill to our waiting coach in a thoughtful mood. Those ancients certainly liked their Liths to be Mega!

Friday 4 October

Casa Rocca Piccola and the Manoelo Theatre

Heading towards Valletta along the coast road we saw many salt pans. Salt gathering is a valuable industry and desalination is the most important way of creating the island's tap water.

Our first visit was to Casa Rocca Piccola. This impressive 16th century home with over 50 rooms was built for Don Pietro La Rocca – a Knight of Malta. From the outside, one could never guess at the wonderful treasure trove within. Every room seemed to have hand-carved tables and chairs, and the dining-room table was laid with sparkling crystal glasses, silverware and lovely porcelain. A painting of a winged horse with human head and wearing a coronet looked uncannily like a member of our Royal Family. Four poster beds, Sedan chairs and beautiful fireplaces filled this living museum.

Outside in the courtyard – apart from two terrapins in a smallish raised pool – was Kiku III – a macaw, balancing on his left claw on a metal pole and looking as though he was making his Scout promise holding his right one up in front of him. Oh I just loved him! Down many steps there was a network of underground tunnels cut out of the rock and a bomb shelter.

Thence we went to the Manoelo Theatre, which was built in 1731 in just 10 months. We sat in the auditorium gazing at all the burgundy and gold seats (557 spread over 5 levels) while listening to the pianist Roberto Cominati preparing for the Vienna Forever concert that evening. Much renovation has been done here and the wardrobe now contains 12,000 costumes. Oh, to go back-stage and see some of them!

The National War Museum at Fort St. Elmo

Fort St Elmo is at the very tip of the Valletta peninsula which divides the Grand Harbour from Marsamxett Harbour. The fort consists of Lower St Elmo (built c 1490) and Upper St Elmo, built in the shape of a five-pointed star - three points towards the sea and two points inland. It was in beautiful warm sunshine when we visited, and we had panoramic views with the golden hues of the massive stone construction forming a majestic background.

The war museum is housed in six buildings between the gun emplacements on top of the fortress. Each building has exhibits covering a different period of its 500 plus years of history including many major wars since the Christians fought the Ottomans in the Great Siege of Malta in 1565 and continuing through the establishment of the British Empire, the first and second World Wars, until the island's Independence in 1974.

Malta's location in the central Mediterranean means that it has always had immense strategic value to all the powers contesting the lands bordering the sea.

Historical highlights covered by the Museum's displays begin with the Norman invasion. The Normans conquered the island in 1091 AD only 25 years after they invaded Britain. In 1530, Emperor Charles V gave the island to the Knights Hospitallers after they were driven out of Rhodes by the Ottomans. It was these Knights of Malta, led by Jean Vallette (hence Valletta), who withstood the Ottoman invaders at the Great Siege of Malta. The Knights of Malta governed the island until it was captured by Napoleon in 1798 en route to invade Egypt. In 1800, the French surrendered to the British and Malta became part of the British Empire. The British adopted it as a naval fortress. During World War II, Churchill called Malta an 'unsinkable aircraft carrier' acting as a naval and air base for Allied forces, a resupply base for Allied convoys, and a refuge for the sick and wounded. The museum contains the World's only remaining example of the Gloster Sea Gladiator biplane fighter that was operational in the war. A popular myth of the time was that the island was defended by only three of these antiquated planes known as *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*.



▲ Kiku III in the courtyard of Casa Rocca Piccola



▲ The Gloster Sea Gladiator Faith

island was defended by only three of these antiquated planes known as *Faith*, *Hope* and *Charity*.

Saturday 5 October

The Hypogeum and Tarxien Temples

Goodness! Malta was such a treat for those interested in prehistory. On Saturday we split into small groups to visit the Hypogeum in Paola. This underground hand-hewn cavity has a regulated microclimate with controlled temperature, humidity and carbon dioxide for protection. Small pre-booked groups only are allowed in and they are subtly kept away from the limestone walls to avoid physical damage to the site. We entered a chamber above ground to experience an explanatory audio-visual 360 degree presentation. Cleverly, this prepares visitors by lowering their breathing rate and temperature and adjusts their eyesight to dim light.

The Upper Level (built 3600-3300BC) consists of a central passage with burial chambers on each side. The Middle Level (3300-3000BC) contains chambers carved to resemble built masonry imitating above-ground temples' windows and doorways. The Lower Level (3000-2400BC) has four side niches and lies 10.6 metres below ground level.

Two rooms at middle level were especially memorable. The 'Holy of Holies' is a magnificent façade of uprights and lintels framed within a larger trilithon. On top of this is a course of corbelling supporting a flat ceiling. This is particularly important because, along with ancient carvings and models from other sites, it gives evidence of how the above-ground structures looked when they were intact.

The 'Oracle Room' contains swirling red-ochre painted decoration and a chamber which amplifies a deep voice to produce a startling booming resonance. Was that by accident or by design? Close by the Hypogeum are the Tarxien Temples of similar age. They consist of four megalithic structures built 3600-2500BC and reused 2400-1500BC. The South Temple (3150-2500BC) is the most richly-decorated with relief sculptures of spirals, plants and animals and the remains of a huge human statue wearing a pleated skirt. It is astonishing that this meticulous workmanship was achieved using flint and stone tools.

We do not know what took place in these buildings but, considering the investment of time and energy in their construction, they were important communal centres for social, religious, political and/or economic activity.

The Inquisitor's Palace, Vittoriosa

We entered the tribunal room, reached through a low doorway which forced prisoners to bend their heads to the Inquisitor. Nearby were cells and a torture room, including a hanging rope. However, this was not the Spanish Inquisition! Although at one point two policemen were burned at the stake for being Protestant, the Roman Inquisition on Malta was relatively lenient. There were few executions, and sentences were mainly fasting on bread and water, going on a pilgrimage, whipping, social work, public humiliation, exile and worst of all – rowing the galleys.

Maritime Museum, Vittoriosa

A walk down the road took us to the Maritime Museum. This was built between 1842 and 1845 as a bakery for the Royal Navy and was converted in 1992 as a museum. I concentrated on the British presence on the island which began in 1800 when the British ended Napoleonic rule. Malta was a vital base during both world wars. The last commander of British forces, Rear Admiral Sir Nigel Cecil, left the island in 1978.

I was interested to see an unusual glass object – a mercury arc rectifier, which was usually used by ships in dock to change alternating current to direct current. There was also an architect's model of Bighi naval hospital. Built in 1675, this became a Royal Naval Hospital in 1829. As such it contributed to the nursing and medical care of casualties whenever hostilities occurred in the Mediterranean, earning Malta the soubriquet of 'nurse of the Mediterranean'. We emerged into the bright sunshine to see yachts aplenty bobbing in the harbour. I could happily have spent a whole day in the museum.

Sunday 6 October

Marsaxlokk, the Blue Grotto and a Splendid Lunch

Sunday was a day for relaxing. Our first destination was Marsaxlokk, whose name means south easterly harbour. The bay on which it stands forms Malta's second natural harbour with a history going back to the Phoenicians. Today it is Malta's main fishing port. The harbour is crammed with



▲ Inside The Hypogeum



▲ The prisoner exit from the Inquisitor's court room. The exit was made short in order that the prisoner had to bend as if bowing to the guards as they exited



▲ *A cave in The Blue Lagoon taken from our boat*

colourful fishing vessels, most significantly traditional Maltese boats painted red, yellow and blue with the 'Eyes of Osiris' on the bows to ward off evil spirits.

On most days of the week, Marsaxlokk is a sleepy little town. Not so on Sundays, when the fish market is open and the waterfront is crammed with stalls selling everything from plastic buckets to prickly pear liqueur. Many Maltese come here to buy the fresh fish landed in the port that very morning. Even more tourists come by the coachload to see the market at its busiest. This is my idea of hell, so we retreated to a pavement café to taste Kinnie, the local soft drink flavoured with bitter oranges and aromatic herbs.

A short drive to the west reached our lunch venue at Wied iz Zurrieq. In a week of delicious lunches in interesting venues, this came top of my list. On a rooftop overlooking the sea we feasted on fantastic fish soup followed by stuffed bream. From there we made our way down a steep path to the tiny harbour where we were, somewhat perilously, loaded eight to a boat for our tour of the Blue Grotto. The boatmen skilfully navigated us in and out of the seven caves which form this attraction. They pointed to many features but language differences meant a certain lack of detail. My guide book comments that you have to be there before noon to

appreciate the various reflected colours but we were lucky – the sun was shining and patches of the sea glistened a bright turquoise.

We had time to ourselves to indulge in ice cream or wander the cliffs and look out to sea to Filfla. This tiny island, about 5km off shore, has been identified as an Important bird area by Birdlife International because of the three species of sea bird that breed there and is now only accessed for scientific purposes. Mission accomplished, we boarded the coach relaxed and ready for drinks before dinner.

Monday 7 October

Gozo

Our well-trained group assembled on the hotel steps with nothing but high expectations for our final adventure. On board the ferry most braved a stiff breeze to get the best views from the upper decks. Once in Gozo a whistle-stop dash through the Ggantija museum transported us



▲ *Our organiser just checking that we were on the correct boat for Gozo!*

back millennia, to the time when the world's oldest free-standing structures were constructed from c3600BC. Still marvelling at the astounding artefacts and pondering over the thought-provoking questions they raised we moved into the awe-inspiring temple complex itself. The heavens promptly opened but wonder at the enormous megaliths assembled with precision and purpose by our distant ancestors kept many exploring regardless. We could marvel at the engineering prowess but could only guess at the the mystical purpose behind these constructions.

From there, the coach took us west across a green landscape dotted with windmills and rural farms. We braved the elements and slippery stones to reach a brooding inland sea. Like our ancient predecessors aligning their masterpieces with solar equinoxes, we all rushed to the far edge, where chinks of light revealed how the crashing waves penetrated the circling cliffs of this natural marvel.

We explored the maze of steps and pathways crisscrossing the capital, Rabat. Miraculously, this walled city has remained intact, with many original buildings open as galleries or museums. Everyone returned with different experiences, as no two parties followed quite the same route. Curious discoveries, from a missing cathedral dome to vast grain cellars, fuelled discussions en route to lunch.

Lunch each day had been a real treat, with today a fitting finale. After overtures of thunder and lightning, we feasted on fish from the sea we overlooked, plus local cheese and wine. All were much appreciated and conversations turned to personal highlights from a magnificent week. Mary Bailey's thoughtful and comprehensive preparations left no stone on either island unturned. I know I was not the only one clapping wholeheartedly when Shirley Hodgson bravely took to the dining-room floor in the evening to voice our thanks, with our 4.20 am departure sadly looming all too soon.

Photos by M Bailey,
Catherine Dixon,
Peter Newley and
Ann Wood.

Thanks to all of you brave enough to describe your adventures - Ceri Addis, Mary Bailey, Sarah Bradfield, Catherine Dixon, Harry Hibberd, Katherine Martin, Jinx Newley, Sue Pears, Marianne Pitman, Keira Stobie and Nigel Tasker.

Visit to Bath

Thursday 19 September 2019

Bath Soft Cheese

Situated at Park Farm on the Bath Road at Kelston, the Bath Soft Cheese Company made their first soft cheese in 1993. They used a recipe dating back to 1802, which may have been a favourite of Lady Hamilton, and have been going from strength to strength ever since. The artisan, organic cheese is made from milk from the farm's dairy herd. In addition to the café staff there are 7 cheesemakers, 3 office staff and 4 farm workers.

Our group was lucky to have a quick cup of coffee sitting in the sunshine in the lovely setting of the café with its stunning views. Our guide, Archie, was not just an excellent guide. He was also one of the cheesemakers and the sales manager. We heard the story of the four cheeses made there: Bath Soft Cheese, Bath Blue, Wyfe of Bath and, finally, the newest cheese, the Merry Wyfe of Bath, which is washed in cider made from apples from their own orchard. A Merry Wyfe of Bath cheese is flavouring the contents of my fridge at this very moment. We heard of the many international awards won by these cheeses, including Supreme Champion in the 2019 International Cheese Awards. Then the best bit - we got to taste the cheeses.

The Friends made quite a picture! We had to dress in blue hair nets and overshoes for the factory tour that followed. These were donned in the cleaning room where we left the 'dirty' side, one overshoe at a time, over a bench into the 'clean' side.

Only one type of cheese is made each day and this is done by just one cheesemaker, with the others doing the rest of the jobs. Each cheesemaker takes a turn at all the cheeses and Archie reckons that the cheesemakers themselves could tell by taste and texture who had made a particular cheese. We went through the different rooms where the cheeses were maturing and learnt about processes that have to be gone through to achieve the high quality and consistency of these cheeses. Nothing is mechanised and everything tested by taste and texture. It was quite a revelation to see how labour intensive the work is and to realise just how skilful the cheesemakers must be.

This visit was a real treat and I shall be returning soon to try out their enlarged café, see the herd of cattle close up and, of course, overdose on cheese.



▲ Bath Soft Cheese Co – Friends with Maturing Merry Wyfe of Bath Cheeses



▲ Bath Blue cheeses

Bath's Original Theatre Royal and Masonic Museum

After going our various ways for lunch we met up with Gary Gostelow outside the entrance to the M & S Food Hall to walk a short distance to an insignificant doorway, passed by me unknowingly on many previous occasions, which is the entrance to the Bath Masonic Hall.

Inside is a large auditorium built in 1750 as the original theatre in Bath. A painting in the museum shows a pit with three tiers of boxes around the sides. It was the first legal theatre outside of London, gets a significant mention in *Northanger Abbey* and had Sarah Siddons as its principal actress between 1778 and 1782. We heard how Mrs Siddons returned for a benefit performance in 1799. It was such a sell-out that most seats were double-booked, resulting in fisticuffs in the audience that neither Siddons nor the constabulary could quell and so, alas, there was no performance.

Despite several refurbishments, it was never satisfactory as a theatre because of its location, which included being too far from fashionable Bath, and its architecture, which included huge pillars dominating the stage. The theatre was closed in 1805 and moved to the current location. In 1809 the building was converted to a Catholic Chapel. As Catholicism was illegal at

Photos by Martin Bailey

the time and they could not bury their dead in consecrated ground, catacombs were made in the basement for burials. We were able to see some of the gravestones on our tour of the museum which is now housed there. One of the former dressing rooms was converted into a small chapel which still exists and is used on occasions by the Freemasons.

The building was purchased in 1865 by the Masons and has been in their possession ever since. Seated in the auditorium, which is now the Masonic Temple, Trevor, our knowledgeable guide, talked to us about Freemasonry as well as the history of the building and answered the many questions we had to ask. With the help of Emir, a Turkish Freemason now living in Bath, we toured the building and the small museum of Freemasonry located in the basement.

This was such a varied and interesting day. Thanks must go to our guides for making the tours so interesting and to Gary in particular for organising this lovely trip so near to home.

Sue Pears

The Vyne

Wednesday 23 October 2019

Imagine a lovely English manor house built of tiny red bricks with elegant windows. Place in front of it an expanse of green sward with fine trees running down to a broad crystal river. On the opposite bank arrange a herd of coal-black cattle, including bulls, and you have The Vyne. Sadly, later owners chose to erect a classical portico with four two storey-high Corinthian pillars and a triangular pediment in front of the doors, slightly spoiling the classical picture – rather like sticking a Roman nose on an English beauty.

The house formerly belonged to Lord Sandys, Henry VIII's Chancellor who visited the house only four times. After the Civil War, The Vyne fell into some decay and was sold to John Chute, the Speaker of the House of Commons. He and his wife Eliza had no children so she adopted Caroline Wiggett, the 3-year-old daughter of her poorer sister. Caroline became the star of The Vyne. In the mid-eighteenth century, William Wiggett inherited the place. He changed his name to Wiggett Chute in honour of his inheritance.

The original house covered most of the ground to the river but the Chutes reduced it to a third of its former size and turned it into a family house (Wiggett had eleven children) and also into a typical stately home of the nouveau riche by collecting, on the Grand Tour, a large quantity of rather miscellaneous and inferior statuary, prints, pictures and other artworks. They also built a magnificent-looking Palladian staircase but used rather poor materials. It looks like the set for the last act of *Cinderella*.

Some rooms were magnificent, some panelled in linen-fold wood from the original Tudor mansion and with impressive fire-places. There were two long galleries, one on the ground floor which should have been an orangery but which was used as the children's play area. Besides inferior statues it contained rocking horses and sets of carpentry kit. The gallery on the first floor with linen-fold panelling was much more impressive and had paintings of Francis Bacon and Elizabeth's one-time favourite, Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. It also had what appeared to be a job lot of marble busts including Seneca, Nero, Achilles, Milton, Shakespeare and Mary Queen of Scots. Bronzes of Charles I, Henry VIII and Oliver Cromwell sat amicably together.

The house is surrounded by ancient woodlands and sprawling gardens including a walled garden. There are plenty of picnic places. There are many outhouses and fascinating sites, including a 600 year old oak tree, to visit. Space does not allow me to do justice to all the interesting things there are to see and do. We are very grateful to Carol Lear for organising the trip.

Robert Walters



▲ *The front of the Vyne showing the portico with Corinthian pillar*

Photo by Michael Lear

To see more visit
www.nationaltrust.org.uk/the-vyne

Powderham Castle and Estate

Wednesday 4 September 2019

Powderham is noted for its deer park and we had our first sighting of these appealing creatures as the coach turned into the drive. The park came into existence partly by chance. Brunel wanted to run his Southern Railway through the Powderham land bordering the River Exe – not a welcome suggestion for the average land owner. However, the Earl of Devon saw a business opportunity. At the time the Exe was much wider and came closer to the Castle: indeed guests often arrived by river. The Earl was keen to have a deer park in front of his house so he made a deal with Brunel – if the railway company paid for draining the land Brunel could have his railway and the Earl his park – win, win! The estuary and deer park are now a designated SSSI.

Some attractions were closed for the season but the Walled Garden was open, though it turned out to be more wall than garden. It has been transformed into a petting zoo / play area. Among a wide variety of creatures to delight young and old were some tiny white chipmunks in constant motion and a very large immobile tortoise which looked as if it was carved in wood – until it blinked.

Philip Courtenay built the castle in 1392 and Courtenays have lived there almost continuously ever since, adding bits to the building in a rather haphazard manner. Only one of the original six turrets remains, the others having suffered at the hands of Cromwell's men. The latest additions, which include the state dining room and the courtyard buildings, were made in Victorian times. It has the feel of a home, with family photographs scattered around and a memorial stone to Timothy the tortoise in the garden.

Our tour began in the Marble Hall, the family sitting room, which had been half of the mediaeval Great Hall. In the 1730s Sir William Courtenay, 1st Viscount, divided the Hall and lowered the ceiling to make the place more homely. The second half is still full height and contains a grand staircase decorated with the most amazing plasterwork, depicting different aspects of the family interests. The rustle of the skirts of the friendly ghost, William's wife Frances, is said to be heard here. A portrait of Frances, wearing a stunning silver grey robe hangs in the Library.

The 2nd Viscount, also Sir William Courtenay, married an inn keeper's daughter, also called Frances. We saw the narwhal tusk which William led Frances to believe was a unicorn horn. Supposedly, putting flakes of the horn into your tea and drinking it daily it will help with fertility. It certainly worked for Frances as she gave birth to thirteen daughters and one son, all but one of whom survived into adulthood.

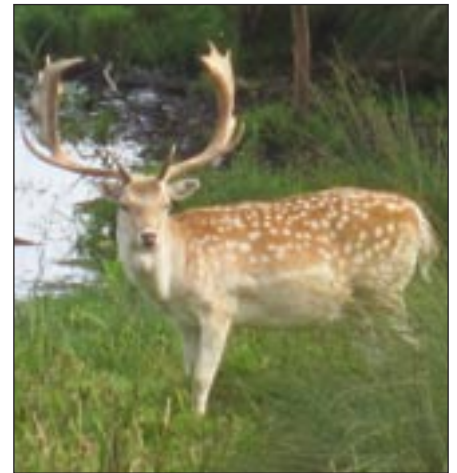
Take care going through the china room into the Library. If you walk under the Turkish fertility lamp and make a wish, who knows what will happen! The Library is very grand, consisting of two adjoining rooms and many windows. Beside the cases of books hang family portraits including the betrothal portrait of three of the thirteen daughters, with the cherub's bare bottom carefully painted over in Victorian times to make it decent.

A secret door leads you into the ballroom built by William, the 3rd Viscount, who inherited the house when he was twenty. Good to his servants and friend of the Prince of Wales, he enjoyed life and did much entertaining, despite the task of marrying off twelve sisters. The bay windows overlook the estuary and the room is light and welcoming. The dome in the centre of the room makes for really good acoustics and this has become the Music Room and is used for concerts and wedding receptions.

There is so much more to tell, from the Victorian mock-Tudor Dining Hall to the Chapel which was once a barn used to house visitors who came by ship as they would need delousing. I did not even get as far as the upstairs rooms or talk about its use as a film set for 'The Remains of the Day'.

Special thanks must go to our guide Andy who brought the house to life for us. I am certainly planning to go back for more.

Lesley Pugsley and Sue Pears



▲ Fallow deer in the park

Photos by Judith Jones

▼ Powderham Castle – seat of the Duke and Duchess of Devon



Clifton Vaults

Thursday 10 October 2019

Most of you will probably have noticed the massive brick plinths cutting into the side of Avon Gorge on which the towers of the Clifton Suspension Bridge stand. I along with most people assumed they were solid. In 2002, a builder replacing paving stones beside the western tower broke through the pavement and discovered a void beneath. Visits to the hollow interior are by special appointment only and the Friends were fortunate to have this opportunity.

We assembled at the Visitor Centre where Gordon, our jovial guide, supervised our fumbling attempts to don hi-vis jackets (mine was designed for a small child) and hard hats. These had to be adjusted and then we looked down at our feet and shook our heads. If it didn't fall off (the hat that is) then it was a perfect fit.

The start of our adventure was the most dangerous part – getting across the road outside the Centre! Those of us the traffic spared assembled beside the chains which Gordon invited us to touch so we could feel the bridge 'breathing'. He then led us to a path alongside the bridge, down a metal ladder and onto a platform with a breathtaking view across the gorge.

Once alongside the plinth supporting the tower we could see that it was built not with red bricks but with large dressed stone blocks. We crouched and passed through a low doorway in the side of the plinth. I was grateful for my hard hat as I managed to hit my head at least a dozen times on the passage roof.

We emerged into a massive vaulted space with the ceiling about 40 feet above us. The spacious interior resembled the inside of a small cathedral. A massive pile of rubble on the floor marked where the Victorian workmen had shaped the stone blocks, leaving the detritus behind when they sealed the vault. The ceiling was adorned with dozens, maybe hundreds, of very thin hollow stalactites formed by water dripping through the lime mortar.

Gordon was a mine of information and rattled off some amazing statistics most of which I immediately forgot! His best tale involved a publicity-hungry juggler who, in 1896, attempted to catch a half pound turnip dropped from the bridge 270 feet above, using a fork held in his mouth. You can read two different accounts of this seemingly suicidal feat complete with contemporary photographs at <https://www.cliftonbridge.org.uk/novel-feat-19th-feb-1896>.

Gordon led us through another low tunnel (more head banging) into a similar vault which was at right angles to the first. He then informed us that there was a third vault close by and another level of vaults below us making a total of twelve vaults in all. I am not sure if I was reassured by learning that the western tower of the bridge, far from standing on a solid plinth, is mainly supported by thin air! That man Brunel was complete genius. Thanks to Carol Ouvry for organising this exciting tour. She was pleased that most of us survived to tell the tale.

Onesiphorus Paul

Read all about the exploration of the Clifton Vaults on <https://www.cliftonbridge.org.uk/vaults>



▲ Feeling the bridge 'breathing' by exploring the gap between the chains. This is something you should all try and then teach your friends and relatives.

Photos by Carol Ouvry and Mary Bailey

▼ Inside the vault. The stalactites were up to 15 feet long. Let's hope the water running down the stalactites is not sucking the stickiness out of the mortar!



Weston Park

Thursday 22 August 2019

At an hour too early to know whether sun hats or umbrellas would be needed, a cheery assortment of Friends climbed aboard a coach in Clifton. After expertly navigating rush hour road works on our long journey north, we were welcomed at Weston Park. There was tea poured from an elegant silver pot which, like the majesty of the stables and granary, hinted at the treasures awaiting us later on.

Thus fortified, and with stern warnings about the size of the estate ringing in our ears, we set off to explore. As usual, part of my fun came from thinking I had discovered a glorious secret, only for other inquisitive Friends to pop out from round a corner. This way many delights were shared and valuable tips passed on.

Bracing winds and threatening clouds accompanied my tour outside, retracing my steps multiple times as I tried to orientate myself in the bucolic rolling parkland that stretched to a romantic folly on the far horizon. Within easier reach were tropical conservatories, bursting with exotic blooms, and a vast walled garden holding a highly organised and productive orchard. Completing a circuit of the tranquil lake I found the historic church, holding poignant memorials to the many generations who had lived in the house.

Our guide in the house was an ex-Bristolian. Through a combination of historical fact and fantastic tales she brought alive the family that had shaped the estate through the centuries, from early records in the Domesday Book to the female architect of the grand building now standing, who clearly stood out as a pioneer role model in the 1600s. What we saw was largely her Palladian vision, with a few added Victorian embellishments and conveniences. Recent occupants have introduced modern practicalities while restoring the original decor, allowing the house to shine as first intended.

No report could be complete without mentioning the rich art collection that could rival many respected galleries. From unusual Constable portraits (minus hands!) to a wall casually filled with van Dycks, there was much at which to wonder. One painting told the fascinating story of shenanigans at the court of Charles II. By looking at the portrait of Orlando (the first Baronet), we could enjoy the story of his daring defiance. We could see the embroidered bag in which he kept the Privy Seal close to the cup made from its melted silver! To fill in all the details, and to experience many more wonderful sights and tales, you will have to visit yourself. I am very grateful to Monica Freeman for arranging such a fascinating trip.

Keira Stobie

Photos by Catherine Dixon



▲ Entrance to Weston Park (and café)



▲ Little engine and engine shed



▼ Garden and house at Weston Park.

Antony Gormley at The Royal Academy

Tuesday 15 October 2019

Morecambe and Wise once sang '...in this world where we live, there should be more happiness...' and I found some at this exhibition. There were no headphones or descriptions of the objects (apart from the name, date and materials used) and this seemed to give a more relaxed atmosphere, as we studied the statues and thought what they meant to us.

The first room had several 'statues' made of blocks of metal put in such a way to look like bodies in various poses (Slabworks). These prompted visitors to engage in lively discussion about them. Another room had huge circles of wire which could be walked through (Clearing V) and a room with 21 suspended room-size cages intersecting (Matrix III). I enjoyed all these, seeing them from various angles. How they managed to hang the Matrix III baffles me.

I also enjoyed seeing Antony Gormley's workbooks with drawings, especially of the Angel of the North. There was a 'cave' (which I did not walk through as it was too dark for me) and I was not too keen on the drawings using blood and rabbit skin glue! However, the last room with the floor completely covered in shallow seawater with clay (Host) was quite mesmerising.

I enjoyed this exhibition, especially as I had been treated to lunch at Fortnum and Mason beforehand! Thank you to Monica Freeman for organising this trip.

Catherine Dixon



▲ Clearing V

Cruise in the Floating Harbour

Tuesday 13 August 2019

Thanks to Gary Gostelow for organising such a super evening cruising round the floating harbour in the *Matthew*, especially the glorious weather with sun and blue sky. We even enjoyed three hot-air balloon 'fly-pasts' – no doubt leftovers from the Balloon Fiesta.

The original *Matthew* was built in the mid-1490s probably as a trade ship. It left Bristol under the command of John Cabot in 1497 sailing west in search of a route to China. He made landfall in Canada – possibly in Newfoundland. In May 1498 Cabot made another voyage with a fleet of five ships from which he did not return although some of the sailors that went with him may have. It seems that the ship survived as well because, intriguingly, the *Matthew* is mentioned in later records in connection with salmon smuggling in 1500, a voyage to Ireland in 1503, and a trip to collect wine from Bordeaux in 1510. The Victorians built the Cabot Tower on Brandon Hill in Bristol to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Cabot's last voyage.

The present *Matthew*, built in 1996, is now 23 years old. Its mast is made from a tree grown at Balmoral and given by Prince Philip. In 1997 the *Matthew* replicated Cabot's voyage by sailing to Newfoundland. The voyage took 55 days. Built to a Portuguese design, the *Matthew* and another replica built in Bonavista, Newfoundland, are the only caravels in the world still going to sea. The ship is used for film work, in festivals and is due to play the part of the *Mayflower* next year.

Catherine Dixon

▼ The *Matthew* moored in the floating harbour



Photos by Catherine Dixon

Limbs and Things

Tuesday 17 September 2019

Before this visit many of us had not given much thought to how medical training is carried out today. If I thought about it at all, I assumed that it is much as it was in the past, with aspiring doctors practising on each other before submitting unsuspecting patients to their first ever attempt at delivering a baby or removing an appendix. Limbs and Things changed that notion.

We began the visit with an excellent introduction by the founder and current president of the company, Margot Cooper. A medical artist, she set up the company in the early 1990s in response to a directive from the General Medical Council. She loved making models and helping medics to understand how the body works. Models were initially made of foam latex, later from silicon. One of Margot's early successes was a birthing model which has been exported to more than twenty countries and has helped to halve the number of babies born with cerebral palsy.

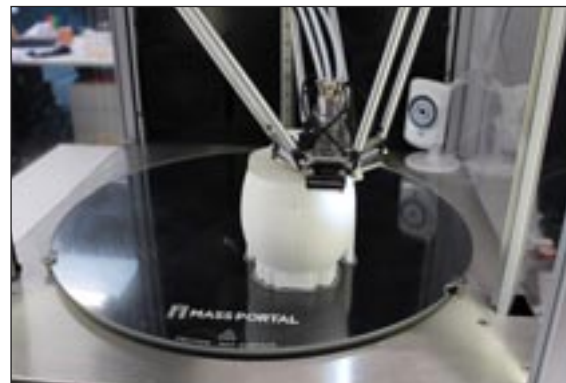
After the talk we were shown round in small groups by members of staff. All the senior staff are highly qualified, with medical or engineering backgrounds. The factory is brightly lit and each area contained many very lifelike model body parts. We saw arms on which trainees could practice taking a blood sample, and model rectums: some of these were 'healthy' models, and some models reproduced a particular disease, to enable trainees to diagnose various maladies when conducting a rectal examination. What I thought looked like a set of tubular bells turned out to be destined for America, for circumcision practice! Models being developed now are 'intelligent' – that is, they respond to the trainee's investigation in a realistic way, and only allow the correct technique to succeed. For procedures like delivering a baby this means the trainee now approaches their first live birth with confidence rather than trepidation.

After a most interesting tour we were treated to tea and cakes and the opportunity to ask more questions, of which there were many. Limbs and Things now has offices in the US, Australia and Europe and models are evaluated and used by specialists from around the globe. It is a great success story for a Bristol company. A number of Friends felt that this was one of the best and most interesting Behind the Scenes visits we have ever done.

Katherine Martin



▲ All designs start with concept drawings



▲ A prototype baby's skull being formed by a 3D scanner



▲ Interactive baby and screen

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