

How to save a museum?

Rescued from permanent closure in 2007 to be reborn as a charitable company in 2010, Wandsworth Museum has been held up by some as a groundbreaking exemplar for local heritage. But since the reopening, all had gone rather quiet. Becky Wallower investigates how the museum is shaping up under its third director in 18 months.



In 2007 Wandsworth Borough Council decided it was no longer in the museum business. It 'reasoned' that as the local leisure facilities attracted more users than its museum, the council should abandon its attempt to provide such cultural facilities in the borough. It therefore determined to save the £300,000 odd it cost annually to run the museum, housed in the Old County Court House in Wandsworth town centre, by closing it down. The museum was attracting 30,000 visitors, including over 8000 school children a year. The collections, largely given by and for local people, were to be distributed around various libraries and offices or packed away for a rainy day, and a web-based facility provided instead.

In their fierce campaign to stop the closure, local societies and individuals were joined by the local press and by the Museums Association at national level. In Parliament, 53 MPs signed an early day motion praising the museum's success in attracting ethnic minorities and telling the story of immigrants from Huguenots to Windrush, and urging the council to reconsider.

None of this changed Wandsworth's resolve to close the museum, but it did attract the attention of a local trust, the Hintze Family Charitable Foundation. The foundation pledged £2 million to re-establish the museum, provided the council would also contribute initial assistance. Eventually Wandsworth agreed a 20 year lease, with the first five years rent free, on part of the West Hill library site, where the De Morgan Foundation collection was already

established.

So philanthropy rode to the rescue, residents breathed a cautious sigh of relief and other threatened museums took note. Would this be the model for the future? Could charitable bodies take over the local authority role in providing a resource for understanding the history and culture of the locality? Could standards be maintained or even improved? Could local people become more involved in the running of the museum? Would fresh vision bring even more people in?

The optimism was a bit premature. A new museum company was duly established, a director appointed, charitable status gained and plans set in place, but moving and reopening the new museum was beset with technical and curatorial problems and took more than two years. When Mayor Boris Johnson finally cut the ribbon in September 2010, the entry fee was a swingeing £8 for a two-room museum. Not surprisingly, visitor numbers fell away. The original director was replaced soon after the opening, and the second one lasted less than a year.

Of the two galleries, the temporary exhibition space is about twice the size of the permanent display, which is disappointing in its coverage and hasn't changed since the opening. Although the museum has over 25,000 objects in its collection, covering 25,000 years of the borough's habitation, very few are displayed. A time line runs round four walls with strands meant to cover human history, cultural landscape and natural landscape stories through quite

a lot of text and a few pictures.

Punctuating the time line on the two walls leading through the late medieval period are a few sparsely filled displays containing objects, mostly borrowed from Museum of London, placed in some cases above even adult eye level. The replica of the famous Iron Age Battersea Shield found in the Thames is shown here, though little is made of it. In a borough liberally sprinkled with Anglo-Saxon settlements like Battersea, Balham, Putney, Tooting and Wandsworth itself, the period gets scant attention. In fact, anyone wanting to find out what it was like living in the area from Prehistory to the Tudor period would be pretty frustrated.

The narrative picks up from the Stuarts onwards, to the point where the walls become crowded with words, images and busier cases. The centre of the room has a miscellany of displays of mixed periods in tall glass cases under the headings of cultural landscape and natural landscape. Interesting stories are hinted at here – Huguenot settlement, the first public railway in Britain, slavery, the mills on the Wandle, but it's rather disjointed and abbreviated.

Enter the latest director, Neil Couzens, recruited in summer 2011 for his marketing and fundraising expertise, a Wandsworth resident with past experience at Saddlers Wells, Chelsea Physic Garden and the National Army Museum. The challenges that face him are considerable. But he knows that, and he has a plan.

He describes his task as a tightrope act: he has to make the project

commercially viable on the one hand, and to present the story – or stories – behind Wandsworth's heritage on the other; to respect the integrity of the artefacts and the history, but to make them broadly appealing; to bring people in for in-depth local knowledge, but to attract visitors from elsewhere too; to be both educational and entertaining; to balance the books, but not to overwhelm with commercialism.

A new strategy is being put together as part of the renewal of museum accreditation. His first tactic, employed to get both numbers and revenue up, is to develop temporary exhibitions with broad appeal, from the collections and from other sources. One featuring images and objects from Wandsworth Prison, where Oscar Wilde and Ronnie Biggs were once inmates, has been followed by a high-standard historic photography exhibition (originally created by Museum of London for the Beijing Olympics), supplemented from the Museum's own collection by pictures of the borough's local towns, from Roehampton to Tooting.

Also a high priority is the need to improve the permanent display which Neil acknowledges doesn't play to the strengths of the collection. In the longer term he thinks it will need new cases and spaces to provide better access for all ages, and, crucially, more flexibility. Reorganisation could provide wall space to show some of the fine paintings in the collection, and could override the pervasive time line that

LEFT The Museum's permanent exhibition
BELOW Partial skull of woolly rhinoceros c. 25000 BC, found during excavations for Battersea Power Station foundations in 1920
RIGHT The Women's Exhibition at Princes' Skating Rink, May 1909, taken by Christina Broom. From the current exhibition of historic photography. © Museum of London



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makes it almost impossible to change emphasis, or highlight a particular era or topic. He believes that some clever, if simple, interactivity also needs to be introduced where none currently exists, to engage visitors much more, without trivialising the objects.

For the short term, Neil also sees value in mining the local resources of the Wandsworth Historical Society and others. Neither historian nor curator himself, he understands that people already knowledgeable about the area and the collections can augment the museum's expertise quickly and cost-effectively. Pamela Greenwood, a well-known archaeologist who has published widely and guides WHS's excavations, and Pat Astley-Cooper, curator of the old museum, have offered to help upgrade exhibitions and rework some of the material, still in storage, that was so popular in the old museum. This would continue a tradition of collaboration that served the previous museum well. Some new, targeted market research will help Neil focus on what material and innovations residents would like to see in their museum.

Apparently the country's first charitable museum to be established from a local authority precursor, Wandsworth Museum has had a tricky start and it's still too early to pronounce this model as a panacea for saving local museums. For a start, philanthropists such as the Hintzes aren't found in every town centre. Countrywide, local museum closures, redundancies and big cuts continue. Around the London area, news from Harlow is that a charitable trust will be established to run the local museum with money from the council's Big Society fund. Other funding sources, such as Heritage Lottery Fund grants have enabled other threatened local museums (eg William Morris Gallery and Vestry House Museum in Waltham Forest) to remain open under the council, with no new charity or trust required. The Church Farmhouse Museum in Hendon, however, sadly closed in 2011, and the fate of its collection is uncertain, while the local history society has been negotiating with the council on a lease to enable them to keep Barnet Museum open.

The finances of the charitable company in Wandsworth are difficult: a large element of commercial or

charitable revenue will be required to replace the annual £200,000 start-up grant provided by the Hintze Trust for the first five years, or else the final £1 million tranche will quickly be eaten away. Entrance fees of any description are a difficult barrier for local museums to overcome when national ones are free. The cafe/shop is essential to bring in funds, but occupies more space than the permanent gallery.

On the plus side, though, with the third director in place since opening 18 months ago, the management structure



and direction are beginning to settle. Fourteen local schools subscribed to the education programme in its first year, and the department is building participants in both schools and adult and family events. With entrance fees now half the original £8, and a schedule of temporary shows in place, visitor numbers are picking up from a level down to less than a third of the previous museum's. The Friends organisation is managing to cover most reception, gardening and cataloguing duties. And with input from professional local volunteers on the history and archaeology side, Neil Couzens should be able to bring the display of the permanent collections up to their potential. Will the professed benefits of independent status – such as flexibility, responsiveness and creativity – be realised as the pieces begin to fall into place? It's still too early to say, but it looks like Wandsworth Museum is heading in the right direction at last.

Portrait of London exhibition runs to 12th August. Visit the Museum at 38 West Hill, SW18 1RZ. See wandsworthmuseum.co.uk.