

A tall thin Georgian house in a side street beside Charing Cross station seems an unlikely location for a museum ('London's latest museum', at least for a while). But this is Benjamin Franklin House, where the diplomat, inventor, statesman and scientist stayed for 16 years when he visited London, and the only surviving building in which he once lived. I took a party of students there on a wet January afternoon, following an invitation from the Curator.

Our first task was to get in – ringing the bell besides the locked door had no effect, so eventually we followed the sign directing us round the corner for 'tickets and information'. This led us to an arch under the station, where we found a poster for BFH in a (closed) theatre box office. Phoning the number on the poster elucidated the reply that if we went back to the house, someone would come and let us in.

A few minutes later, we were warmly welcomed by a cheerful young man, who led us down into the basement, the only addition to the house since the 18th century. Here were displays on the walls (life of Benjamin Franklin, history of the house, timeline and a small selection of artefacts), and beneath a glass panel in the floor (mutilated human bones). Franklin's landlady's son-in-law had practiced anatomy, and apparently dumped the remains in the garden. After a short introductory AV presentation, we were ready for the 'Historical Experience'. At this point Polly Hewson, the landlady's daughter, appeared and guided us upwards through the house, passing through various domestic and political scenes portrayed through high-tech AV equipment, and in which she herself took part. The perfect hostess, she vanished silently in Franklin's study, leaving the young man



Dramatic history at Benjamin Franklin House

Clive Orton and students from the Institute of Archaeology discover what happens when a museum relies on drama instead of artefacts to present a historical site

to take us to the top floor, the Student Science Centre. Here we found replicas of some of Franklin's experiments, touch-screen computer games and the pièce de résistance, a glass *armonium*. This amazing instrument produces sound in the same way as a wetted wine-glass rim, but can be played rather like a keyboard. A serious instrument, this – even Mozart and Beethoven had written music for it.

A quick question-and-answer session and we were back out in the wet street, wondering if it had really happened, and what to make of it all. What had we learnt and felt? Did the use of a costumed actress plus high-tech equipment in the shell of an 18th century house, almost devoid of furniture, really work? I certainly felt that I knew a great deal more about the life and times of Benjamin Franklin than I had before, and that his benign presence in the house was almost palpable. As an archaeologist, I was disconcerted by the paucity of artefacts, but putting my prejudices aside, I have to admit that I enjoyed the experience and that, for me at least, it 'worked'.

Top: Meg Faragher, as the landlady's daughter Polly Hewson, contributes to the historical experience of Ben Franklin's life in Craven Street

Left: The restored Georgian house where Franklin became pater familias to the Hewson family, and where Polly's husband William Hewson established his anatomy school



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