

Community heritage in Southwark



ABOVE Southwark Heritage Centre and Walworth Library, with Elmer the patchwork elephant representing the borough's varied communities

BELOW Roman hunter god with hound to his left and stag to his right, recovered in 1977 from a well in Southwark Cathedral crypt, comparable to Cotswold examples of the hybrid deity Apollo Cunomaglos



For one of the most history-rich areas in London, it's not surprising that great volumes of objects, artefacts and records relating to some 2000 years of concentrated habitation have been amassed in Southwark. What is unexpected is to see some of this wealth of material become available to the public in a brand new resource – opened in the midst of a pandemic.

The Southwark Heritage Centre celebrates its first anniversary this spring. In April 2021 the new facility, integrated with the new Walworth Library, was inaugurated in the residential-led Elephant Park development by Southwark council and Lendlease. This solution followed years of headscratching about how and where the tens of thousands of heritage items could be managed.

In common with other London areas, most archaeological material has been stored for decades at the LAARC (the archive run by Museum of London). But some artefacts, including finds from Kathleen Kenyon's 1946 Borough High Street dig, plus Southwark and Lambeth Archaeological Excavation Committee (SLAEC) rescue digs in the 1960s and 1970s, have remained south of the river. And, over the years, these have been added to earlier donations and collections, mainly those of the Cuming family, two generations of local collectors of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Between 1906 and 2013, the Cuming collection had formed a centrepiece of Southwark's local heritage offering, although much of the material had been collected from around the world by father Richard and son Henry Syer Cuming.

The archaeology, ethnography and natural history inventory described in

A huge blaze at the old Walworth Town Hall in 2013 had serious consequences for Southwark's historic Cuming Museum.

Becky Wallower spoke to Curator Judy Aitken to find out how the collection has been renewed in a brand new environment.

Henry's will may have numbered up to 100,000 items.

The major Town Hall fire of 2013 was feared to have destroyed much of the collection, which had been based in two galleries there, but a successful rescue operation saved almost all of it. Nevertheless, everything remaining had to be stored until solutions and next stages could be considered.

Coming together

Having been with Southwark in numerous roles since 2008, Judy Aitken became curator of the collection, rather than of the no longer extant museum, in 2015. She remembers being asked constantly when the Cuming was coming back. 'The concept of the new heritage centre evolved through community consultation, various ideas and stages, and it was championed tirelessly by the Walworth Society and others,' she says.

Also having responsibilities as registrar and learning officer and for aspects of heritage ranging from historic statues to blue plaques, Judy has welcomed working with borough archaeologist Chris Constable, Walworth community archaeologist Stephanie Ostrich, archivist Patricia Dark and her team, and with SLAEC and the LAARC. She was joined by a second staff member in 2021.

Originally there were to be separate units for heritage and library, so once the council agreed the idea of a shared space, much work remained to be done to resolve how the two institutions could best work together to meet different needs and approaches. 'The current children's library would have been ideal for special exhibitions, for instance, but meeting health and safety needs for children was of course a priority,' says Judy.

The splendidly eclectic Cuming collection remains the core of the displays and favourites of past visitors, such as the taxidermy bear and mummy face mask, are included, as are items collected by Henry both



from Victorian infrastructure projects like the Surrey Canal and burgeoning railways, and from work and play in the daily lives of south Londoners.

Heritage in context

For anyone with interests in archaeology, the Roman hunter god that greets everyone entering the new light, bright space offers the perfect welcome. Discovered during excavations at Southwark Cathedral, such statues are uncommon in London, but the same god can be found on the Goldsmiths’ Hall altar.

The other heritage displays focus on two main aspects: a great ‘world wall’ samples all manner of examples from the Cuming collection, originating from multiple continents and cultures; and the Story of Southwark is introduced in large-scale cases highlighting people, places, work and play in the borough, using acquisitions up to the present day.

These displays are very much enhanced by 32 smaller, specially-themed cases integrated throughout the library shelves. This creative approach feels like it works: it’s easy to imagine someone looking for a book on the First World War being drawn to the real-life trench art, barbed wire, dry biscuit and tin cup in the adjoining display.

Further stand-alone themed cases dotted around the library highlight particular, often quirky, features of the collections. One displays a variety of ‘Billies and Charlies’ – artefacts forged by Victorian wide boys, William Smith and Charles Eaton, whom Henry Syer Cuming exposed to the British Archaeological Association as fakes in 1858. Another shows a collection of charms to ward off ill and evil. Another introduces implements of writing from a Roman stylus to a lavishly decorated American typewriter.

Next to the main collection displays is space for special exhibitions, the first of which used contemporary artworks with items from the collections to invent plausible myths, and encourage visitors to think about how stories we ‘know’ come about and develop. A mythical Vincent van Gogh portrait of Henry Cuming’s sister is used to probe an invented

tale of her romantic involvement with the nearby resident artist. In June a new exhibition, will recall borough residents’ own experiences.

On a Saturday afternoon visit in February, the library and study spaces were busy, a couple had brought visitors in to see exhibits, and several people were making use of the ‘stairplace’, where wide stages two steps high form a seating area for up to 50 for talks and events, alongside several mini display cases and artworks.

On the mezzanine level is the copper-lined Faraday room, representing the discoveries of the Southwark-born scientist, and built to serve as a meeting space. Fascinating though it is, Judy feels this hasn’t yet fulfilled its promise during Covid restrictions and may need some rethinking.

It is one item on her long list of issues and projects to be tackled: cataloguing the dispersed collection; reboxing; developing an accessible store for researchers; loaning objects and artworks; creating external exhibitions with partners like London College of Commerce and Morley College, and in the Old Kent Road regeneration area; reviewing and filling gaps in collecting histories and coverage of particular communities such as local Latinx and other residents.

Longer-term priorities are installing more interactive displays, and moving to a fully digital collection, both of which would have resource, maintenance and management implications.

As the heritage team works to include ever more voices, images and stories in the future, it’s clear that the striking new facilities represent a significant step towards the overall objectives: to preserve an intact collection, and connect with key communities.



ABOVE A lid for a pot of ‘real bears’ grease’ purveyed by a Victorian hairdresser near the location of the new Southwark Heritage Centre

LEFT History and War section of library, with small cases inserted on world history and two world wars, plus historic uniform and Southwark prints above

BELOW View across an installation for a ‘Myth Making’ special exhibition, with Cuming ‘world wall’ on right and blue Story of Southwark cases beyond



The Centre is based at 145–147 Walworth Road, SE17 1FZ, and is open Mon–Fri 10.00 am–8.00 pm, Sat 10.00 am–5.00pm, Sun closed.

Further information: <http://heritage.southwark.gov.uk/>