



Museum Service Annual Report 1st April 2022 - 31st March 2023

January 2023 marked the end of the National Lottery Agreement - a 25-year legal agreement required for the creation of the Museum in the Park. It is a testament to all involved, past and present, that we have been able to reach that milestone. Work was started on a new Collaboration Agreement between Stroud District Council and the Stroud District (Cowle) Museum Trust which will be completed in 2023. The existing Chair stood down during 2022 after steering the Trust through substantial change over many years. The Trust also aimed to fill vacancies.

We welcomed nearly 43,000 visitors, up 35% on the year before (19/20 was 56,000). Sales in the shop and café were healthy. Public donations were positive and encouraging, these funds being held by the Trust to support collections care, development and support museum grant applications. Plant sales were also good, with these funds being held by the Trust to support the walled garden.

An important aspect of our audience development is the free-to-join Museum Membership. With the support of the Council and Trust we were able to extend our external marketing support for part of the year which enabled a tidy handover once this ended. Numbers continued to steadily grow and stood at 810 at year-end. As part of this project, we also rolled out a new electronic point of sale for the shop/café enabling us to move to a cloud-based system and away from a standalone till.

Although we've been unable to re-launch our volunteer programme during 22/23 due to resource issues, existing volunteers contributed just over 3,600hrs (1.9FTE), the vast majority in the walled garden. The Garden continues to rightly receive many accolades and it was wonderful that the Walled Garden gardeners received a community award from Stroud Town Council "in recognition of the contribution they have made to our community".

During 2022 we were contacted about the discovery of an exceptional local prehistoric site containing the remains of animals that lived in a tropical sea. Discovered beneath a field, the roughly 183-million-year-old fossils are stunningly well preserved like they were frozen in time. There were jaw-dropping photos of the hundreds of fossils found. They included 3D fish, fish with soft parts (including eyeballs!), ichthyosaur bones, rare insects and more. The museum's Collections Officer took part in the excavation and also successfully applied for an Arts Council England grant to run a family event and evening talk at the site, with over 800 people attending the day.



There are missing histories in the collections so to this end a temporary display was created on women's health highlighting how under-represented this subject is in the collection. This was the first in a series of displays on the theme of missing histories – the installation timed to coincide with International Women's Day. This led to a group of women sharing their stories of motherhood and menopause and creating a piece of bunting to represent their story. These were then put on display. Following this, the museum worked with Stroud Maternity Matters to create a temporary display to celebrate the local maternity unit. There were objects on loan from parents who have benefitted from the services and support, as well as from local midwives.

We have been supporting various external research requests, which in time, help to shed new light on the collections and raise the profile of the museum. The Community Case hosted displays from compact collections, memorabilia from Stroud Rotary through to the Council's STRIDE group displaying personal objects and photographs alongside their reflections on finding and celebrating their identities and accomplishments to mark the 50th Anniversary of the first Pride March in the UK.



We successfully secured grants to purchase a hoard of 61 Charles II & William III coins found at Alkington with grants from the V&A Purchase Fund and Headley Trust, with a contribution from the Cowle Trust. We also launched an appeal to purchase a mourning ring from Painswick, for which 50% had been raised by the end of financial year.



The project to replace our single-user Collections Access Database with a modern Collections Management System (CMS) was re-started after being on hold since 2020 due to Covid-19. The procurement of the new CMS will be a major project for 23/24.

A geological conservator was contracted to undertake a detailed review of the Geology collections looking at radioactive and otherwise toxic specimens, investigate pyrite decay, and to make other general recommendations on the state of the collection and its longer-term preservation. 28 specimens were identified as having pyrite decay in varying degrees that were salvageable and the conservator was contracted to undertake the remedial work. A mould outbreak was also discovered in rooms at one of our collection stores. Conservators were contracted to investigate and make recommendations. The museum staff have worked through those and worked to try and stabilise the environment before planning any object cleaning.

Our events & exhibitions continued to offer a mix of high quality, welcoming and enjoyable activities and events for different audiences and age groups. Notable highlights included the 'Thread of Light' exhibition, showcasing kiln cast glass sculpture by internationally acclaimed artists, five of whom live and work in Stroud, this taking place during the UN's International Year of Glass. The ability of the museum to host such spectacular international work cannot be underestimated. Another standout and popular exhibition was 'Handstitched Stories' by Sabine Kaner. Her work generates conversations on identity, mental health, memory and personal experiences, using colours, symbols and semi-abstract compositions to create visual narratives and metaphors.

The museum responded to wider issues and introduced a series of Wednesday Winter Warmers with free refreshments and a local history slideshow. We also launched a new Harmony Singing for wellbeing course. School visits have returned with increasing frequency and the remote learning programme established during Covid-19 continues to prove a useful addition. Recruitment to replace our Learning & Access Officer, who was retiring in April 2023, was also undertaken. We were also able to recruit to two new roles to help us re-build our capacity and programme. The well-being of staff continued to be a major concern during the year.

A SW Museum Development Green Grant for "Revealing Hidden Sustainable Stories of House & Garden" enabled us to run a series of events for gardeners and nongardeners, focusing on topics such as propagation, composting, biodiversity and encouraging wildlife. We created a Sustainable Stories loans box for our Remote Learning Project providing resources for schools and community groups. The museum also successfully applied for an Earth Day grant for delivery in April 2023.

At the end of 2022 the museum was notified it was included in a de-carbonisation project to remove the Council's leisure centres from gas. This project is due to be completed in March 2024 and is a great opportunity for the museum despite some delivery challenges. With the support of the Cowle Trust a range of water butts made of recycled materials were installed throughout the walled garden enabling us to substantially increase water harvesting from 400ltrs to 2,400ltrs.

As noted above, there were notable achievements and challenges in the year, some unexpected, but that is the exciting nature of work in the museum sector – you just don't know what will present itself or be unearthed!

Kevin Ward, Museum Development Manager
Governing Body Approval: 24th July 2023