

# 130 YEARS OF STOCKPORT MUSEUM

## 'The Chairman was authorised to buy an umbrella stand'

Frank Galvin

*That the Mayor and Chairman be requested to suggest, very respectfully to Messrs. Kershaw and Smith, the Borough Members, that the building they so liberally and kindly promised to erect in Vernon Park, should it meet their approval, consist of a lounge, Park-Keeper's house adjoining thereto, and a store-room for bedding-out plants: and that the question of a Museum and Public Library be taken up on some future favourable opportunity...*

29 October 1858: Minutes of the Manorial Tolls Committee

Fortunately, for the people of Stockport, this suggestion did not meet with the approval of James Kershaw and John Benjamin Smith; undeterred they pressed ahead with their plans to provide the people of Stockport with their own Public Museum... rather than a store for bedding plants!

Kershaw and Smith, who were both Liberal MP's for Stockport, had made their generous offer at the opening celebrations of Vernon Park on 20 September 1858. By the following April a site had been chosen at the highest point of the park, and the plans had been drawn. Just twelve months later the building was ready.

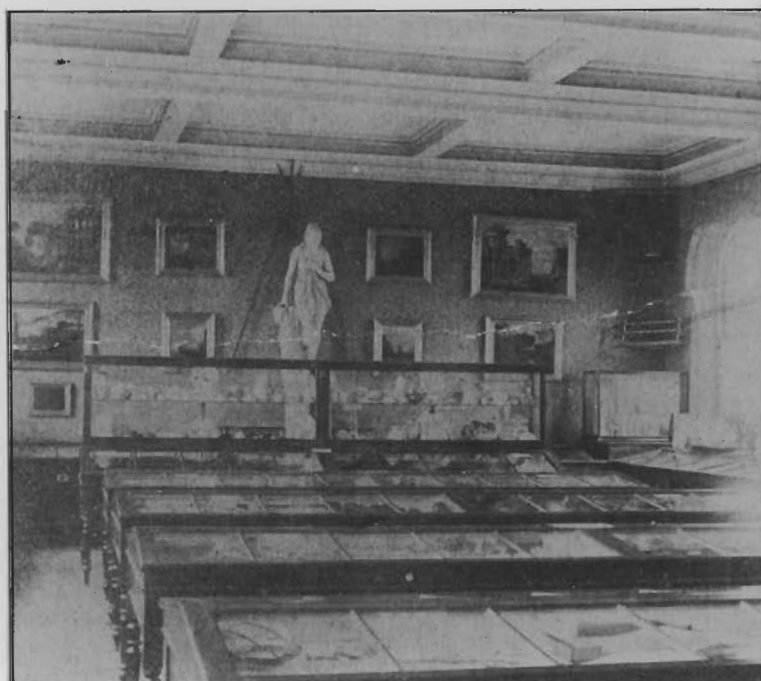
On 22 October 1860, the Mayor and over eighty guests joined Kershaw and Smith for the opening celebrations. There were speeches, toasts to "The Queen, the Army and Navy Volunteers" and sumptuous refreshments of champagne and lobsters. But when the euphoria had died down, there were two important problems to be faced: no money, and no exhibits!

Having accepted the gift of the museum, Stockport Corporation found itself in the embarrassing position of having no funds with which to support it. The town had not, as yet, adopted the Public Libraries and Museums Act of 1855, which would have allowed for the support of the museum from the rates. But at a meeting on 28 February 1861 the issue was debated, and the Act adopted "by a very large majority", the announcement of which "was received with deafening and protracted cheering". The provision of funding allowed for the appointment of a keeper, and for the purchase of show-cases and other furniture and fittings. The minutes of the Manorial Tolls Committee for 11 October 1865, even record that... "The Chairman was authorised to buy an umbrella stand for the Museum".

*Gentlemen, during my visit to Rome, nearly twenty years ago, I had apartments in the Palazzo Brancadore, and finding the Marquis desirous to sell his pictures, I purchased them and they have remained in their packages until now. Your museum not having yet received the support anticipated, it occurred to me that these pictures might serve to cover a portion of the naked walls and at the same time, the loan of them might perhaps encourage gifts or loans of a similar kind.*

The pictures were gratefully accepted, first as a loan, but later as a gift, and encouragement indeed they must have been for a trickle of gifts soon turned into a flood. It was originally intended that the ground floor gallery be used as a museum, and that the upper floor would be used as an art gallery. But so many donations were received that it soon became necessary to install display cases on both floors, and hang pictures wherever wall-space would allow. Indeed, so many were the gifts received, that in 1866 the Corporation extended the museum by constructing a new wing, which increased the available display space from two galleries to three.

So what of the early collections? What was there to see? Well, there was the Smith collection, consisting of over forty large oil paintings: old masters by Murillo, Velasquez, Salvator Rosa, Poussin, ...and the rest! Unfortunately, as you might have guessed, all of these works later proved to be inferior paintings, wrongly attributed, which were consequently removed from the walls and discreetly slipped



*The Lower gallery in the 19th century.*



*Vernon Park Music Festival, 1913.*

into store. Poor Smith, had he been duped by the Marquis, or had he also been deceived?

Smith's paintings jostled for room with many other curious exhibits: 'Venus at the Bath', a twelve foot high marble statue which formerly stood in the park, a bust of Lord Palmerston, a stuffed American racoon, a model of a Russian farmstead, two pole-cats and a mongoose. In the late nineteenth century, the museum must have indeed been a veritable cabinet of curiosities. In a letter to the *Stockport Advertiser* one reader was "surprised and grieved at the determination of the Vernon Park Committee to remove the beautiful statue [Venus at the Bath] into the museum", where it would be "surrounded by articles of a ludicrously opposite description". Early records show a bewildering assortment of exhibits: ten bottles of Indian reptiles, the foot of a seal, a piece of coal, model of a carpet weaving loom, a snake or lizard, Tahitian native clothing, skin of a flying squirrel, skin of a bandicoot, specimens of palm oil and candles, a Kaffir pipe, basket and spoon and three weapons of war. The skins of many foreign animals and birds were donated by Belle Vue Zoo, in Manchester, and included a lion, two monkeys, a lynx and a black swan. Another list of donations dating from 1884 includes: a pair of stockings and garters, a pair of boots and a cornet from South Africa, a basket of blackberries worked in beads, a jackdaw, a cuckoo and a wild goose!

As well as a Museum and Art Gallery, the building also served another important role in the town, as the town's first free public reference library. The library moved to larger premises above the Produce Hall in the Market Place in 1874, and the space at the museum was converted into a much needed refreshment room, which proved to be most popular until its closure at the outbreak of the Second World War.

As we have seen, the museum's collections had grown rapidly, but haphazardly since its opening in 1860. It was not until 1885 that the first qualified curator was appointed: John Tym. Tym had previously maintained a private museum at Castleton, Derbyshire, and had acquired considerable expertise, especially in the field of geology. Under his direction the random collection of curiosities was gradually reorganised so as to exploit its educational potential. He improved and expanded the geological collections, travelling to all parts of the country to obtain suitable specimens. His most notable contribution, however, was the construction of a magnificent window of Blue John. It consists of thin translucent slices of the rare fluorspar mineral, Blue John, and Tym used all fourteen varieties of the stone, with its characteristic banding to create a dazzling effect. The window has recently been renovated and repositioned to once more allow it to be seen in natural daylight as Tym had intended. On a bright or sunny day the effect is absolutely stunning.

John Tym died in 1901 at the age of 72. He was succeeded as curator by Edward Hewitt, who embarked upon a programme of reorganisation and improvement. He introduced gas lighting into the galleries, and arranged for a concrete floor to be laid in the basement so that it could be used for the storage of the rapidly expanding collections. In the public galleries he adopted what was then considered to be a more modern approach to display technique.

In the early years of the twentieth century, up to the outbreak of the First World War, the museum reached a peak in terms of popularity, and visitor figures. Attendances varied between 50,000 and 60,000 visitors annually. The popularity of the museum was, to a large extent, bound up with the popularity of the park. The new tramway, which had been laid to serve the park,



*Plague Stone from Stockport Market Place. Money was dipped in vinegar to disinfect it during plagues.*

brought many extra visitors to enjoy the bowling greens, the floral displays, the band concerts and, of course, the Museum.

Edward Hewitt died in 1917 and was replaced as curator by Gilbert F. Williams. During his curatorship additional premises were acquired in the form of Woodbank Hall which was given to the town by Sir Thomas Rowbotham J.P. in 1921. The hall, which is a fine Regency house designed by Thomas Harrison of Chester, is situated in the adjoining Woodbank Park and is just a few minutes walk from Vernon Park museum. The hall was adapted for use as a museum of Fine Art and Folk Life, and continued in this role until 1944 when it was required

for other purposes and closed as a museum. Williams had died in 1934 and had been replaced by Reginald Wagstaffe who was an outstanding natural historian and taxidermist. During his curatorship the two museums established an enviable reputation for the growing importance of the natural history collections to which Wagstaffe added many important specimens.

At the beginning of the Second World War Wagstaffe left Stockport to take up a post at York Museum, and was replaced as curator by his assistant R.C. Sansome, who himself left in 1944. For two years there was no curator, and during this period there was much neglect and general deterioration. Visitor figures to the museum dropped dramatically after the war, partly due to the poor standard of displays, but also due to changing social habits. The increase in private car ownership meant that Stockport people travelled further afield for their entertainment, and the museum's educational role was seriously diminished by the impact of radio, cinema and, above all, the advent of television.

In the post-war era the first curator was J.R. Rimmer who was appointed in 1946. He made many improvements to the displays, but his most important contribution was in the areas of documentation and record keeping, which had largely been neglected. When Rimmer left in 1953, to take up a post at Warrington Museum, this work was continued by his assistant W.S. Gilbert who retired in 1968. Gilbert was followed by Harry Fancy who expanded the range of museum services on offer to the public, particularly in the areas of schools and adult education and temporary exhibitions. There was also a greater emphasis on local social and industrial history, and collecting was largely confined to these subject areas, a trend which has continued to the present.



*Music Festival Committee outside the Museum, 1913.*



*Battersby's hat factory, Stockport, 1911. The soft hat finishing room, where hats are smoothed by machine.*

The 1970s and 1980s was a period of rapid and dramatic change, not only for Stockport, but for museums everywhere. New museums were opening to meet new needs, or at least the redefined requirements of an ever more discerning and discriminating clientele. Older institutions, like Stockport, had to change, to redefine their role and to present themselves in a contemporary light. The basic function of a museum to collect and preserve remained, and remains, unchanged. But there was now an increased awareness of the importance of interpretation and accessibility.

For Stockport Museum, one of the biggest changes to occur was as a result of local government reorganisation in 1974, when neighbouring urban districts were combined with Stockport to create the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport. The museum service was reshaped to include the War Memorial Art Gallery on Wellington Road, Bramall Hall, and administrative and storage facilities at Woodbank Hall. For the museum the challenge was to collect and interpret the history of an enlarged area; the Metropolitan Borough of Stockport.

To reflect this changing role, the museum changed its displays, with a revamp of its local history gallery in the late seventies, which gave the museum an important, but temporary fillip. But other improvements were not forthcoming, and the development of the service was seriously hindered by chronic storage problems and restricted financial resources. By the mid to late 1980s a 'make or break' situation had been reached, especially as regards the storage of collections. The museum's important collection of hatting machinery, which had been acquired in the 1970s, was deteriorating in sub-standard stores. Hatting had once been one of Stockport's most important specialised industries, and its machinery was both interesting and unique. Happily, the council voted to save the machinery, and premises were secured at the

former Battersby's hat factory in Hempshaw Lane, where the machines are currently being restored and good progress is being made in establishing the country's first specialised museum of the hatting industry.

At the museum itself, other important and significant improvements have been made during the past few years, and are still continuing at a lively pace. Indeed the building is being transformed, literally from top to bottom. The fabric of the building has never been in better condition following a vigorous programme of repairs and improvements including heating, electrical, stone-cleaning and floodlighting etc. The public galleries are being completely redisplayed in an attractive contemporary style.



*Scold's Bridle.*



*The museum today.*

The whole of the upper floor has been transformed with the recent completion of a major exhibition entitled 'On One Round Hill', which tells the history of Stockport from prehistoric times to the present. The exhibition title mimics the words of a seventeenth century writer, William Webb, who visited the town and described its situation in this way, "Upon one round hill hath this town of Stockport been built, the summit, or top whereof, affords the Market Place and Convenient room for the Church..."

The story begins in about 10,000BC with a life size reconstruction of a temporary dwelling in the nearby limestone caves of Derbyshire, and continues with Stone-age burials, Bronze-age tools, Iron-age beliefs, and life in the Roman period. Following the Dark Ages, for which there is little local evidence, a large section of the exhibition is devoted to the development of mediaeval Stockport, beginning with its Charter in 1220. Subsequent displays deal with the church, the castle, and life in and around the market place. Two grim exhibits are the Stockport Brank (or scold's bridle), and the plague stone, which is a shallow stone basin formerly used in the market place for the washing of money during the time of the plague.

Later displays deal with the militia, radicalism, reformers and civil unrest. A major section examines the development of Stockport's trades and industries from their early domestic origins to the development of the factory system. Wool, silk, linen, rope, hatting, cotton, brewing and engineering are all featured. The exhibition concludes with

displays on topics of social interest such as toys, domestic by-gones, the police and fire services, and Stockport during the last war.

A short (10 minute) slide show expands some of the themes and gives visitors a general introduction to the displays. A lively, contemporary and colourful approach to the displays, combined with a concise but informative interpretive text has ensured the exhibition's popularity with the public.

Elsewhere in the building the improvements continue. On the ground floor there is a new reception desk, shop and tea room, where light refreshments can be obtained. It is proving to be very popular with visitors to the museum and park. The rest of the ground floor is currently being developed as 'The Green Gallery', where local environmental issues will be explored, and the natural history of the Etherow/Goyt valley, which flows through Vernon Park, will be examined through new displays, and using interactive computer interpretive techniques.

The basement too, is being given the treatment. New toilets for visitors have been installed, and the rest of the space, which was hitherto used only for storage, is being opened up as a new display area. These displays will be concerned with the history of the museum's collections and the way they have grown since 1860. As a consequence, the subject matter will be wide ranging; from Archaeology, Ethnography, Natural History, Ceramics, Costume, Cameras, Victorian and Twentieth Century Life. Displays

will contain a high concentration of objects: a technique which is best described as display/storage. By this means we hope to make accessible to the public a large number of exhibits which are currently confined to the stores.

Another important recent development of the museum service has taken place away from the museum itself. In the Summer of 1990 over 2,500 people visited the Stockport Air Raid Shelters in small groups. The guided tours of the underground shelter system were conceived as a part of the museum's policy of interpreting the wider environment, of taking the museum to the people. Guides, who were trained by the museum service, conducted visitors on hour-long tours of the shelters. Each visitor was equipped with a safety helmet, battery and lamp, which added considerably to what visitors described as a unique and memorable experience. Visits are arranged on weekday evenings, and on Sundays, or at other times by arrangement for organised groups and parties. The shelters have proved to be particularly popular with schools, for which a visit can be an important learning experience and highly appropriate in terms of the requirements of the new National Curriculum. The recent appointment of an Education Officer at the museum, whose brief is to develop a programme of activities closely tailored to the needs of schools, is ensuring an important role for the museum in the field of education.

The many improvements to the museum service which have been achieved during the past few years are attributable to a variety of factors: a dedicated staff, a supportive council, an enthusiastic public, and the support of a number of outside agencies and grant-aiding bodies. Worthy of particular mention is the moral, technical and financial support of the Area Museums Council (North West Museums Service), and the Museums and Galleries Commission, without whose support many of the above projects would not have been possible.

I hope this brief account of the development of Stockport Museum from 1860 to 1990 will give readers an appreciation of the activities of one of the region's oldest established museums, and that something of its future may be glimpsed from its recent promising developments.

The museum is open daily, including Sundays and bank holidays from 1 April to 31 October, 1pm to 5pm; and between 1 November and 31 March on Saturdays and Sundays only from 1pm to 5pm. Schools are accommodated all year round, Monday to Friday. Pre-booked parties are welcome in the evenings, Monday to Thursday, all year round.

Admission is free, although a charge is made for Air Raid Shelter visits: £2.75 adult, £1.75 children under 15. For all enquiries write or telephone: **Stockport Museum, Vernon Park, Turncroft Lane, Offerton, Stockport SK1 4AR. Tel. 061 474 4460.**

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