

THE MUSEUM AT TOUCHSTONES ROCHDALE

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After over a decade in storage Rochdale's Museum Collections finally opened in its new state of the art 'hands-on' home in November 2002. Touchstones Rochdale is the Borough's beautifully restored arts and heritage centre, a fusion of specialist skills and knowledge incorporating a Museum, Local Studies Centre, Art Gallery, Heritage Gallery, Tourist Information Centre, Education Studio and Performance Space, Café and Bookshop. The long awaited museum is an exciting, accessible and hands-on experience that uses the Borough's magnificent collection together with photographs, interactive displays and audio-visual features that explore the townships of Rochdale past and present.

The building the museum is part of has long been associated with the tradition of arts and heritage. Touchstones Rochdale



A View of Touchstones Rochdale with one of the distinctive spires marking the Esplanade

first opened as a Public Library in October 1884. The building cost £5,900, was single story and built with Yorkshire stone.

Two extensions were added to this building. The first in 1903 was for the Art Gallery and Museum, at an estimated cost of £5,000. Rochdale's local dignitaries had long fought for the establishment of a gallery and museum, and it was with thanks to the generosity of Mr James Ogden that this extension was built. This 2 storey extension was built with Yorkshire stone and included on the frontage 3 panels representing Science, Art and Literature. The final phase extended the Art Gallery and Museum at the junction of the Esplanade and Manchester Road, and cost £6,500. This extension was opened in April 1913. Since then the building has been adapted, redecorated and refurbished many times. The museum moved to new premises in the 1970s, and in 1993 the public library moved to the purpose built Wheatsheaf Centre. The Art Gallery and Local Studies Library remained open in the building for another eight years.

The Museum

The museum collections themselves have had a chequered and at times an uncertain past. Although the Art Gallery and Museum did not open until 1903, Rochdale Corporation had been receiving gifts and donations as early as 1874. Some of the first gifts were local flints and fossils, rocks and minerals. Many local collections were donated, bequeathed or purchased, including a collection of flint implements received from Dr. H.C. March. This collection dates from the Neolithic period and can be largely attributed to the Rochdale area. Later donations included objects of curiosity along with collections of Natural History, Ethnology and local history. When the museum first opened in 1903 these exhibits were laid out in 22 exhibitions cases, purchased by the Rochdale Literary and Scientific Society.

The museum was to later benefit from another local benefactor, Charles Heape, whose family also gave very generously to the Art Gallery Collections. Charles Heape donated his collection of Egyptian artefacts, collected during his travels in the late 1890s. His brother, Richard Heape gave to the public library a series of photographs taken as a record of these travels. These incredible images now form part of the Local Studies Collection.

An important development in the history of the museum was the establishment of the John Bright Memorial Room in 1925, made possible by the generosity of the Bright family. The most striking object in the room was the large oak bookcase, the gift of John Bright's daughter. This bookcase and the 1,200 volumes contained in it were a national gift to John Bright in 1853 in acknowledgement of his work on behalf of the Anti-Corn Law League. The books, purchased from a subscription of £5,000 were selected by John Bright personally. The case itself was

designed by Mr Morris, and constructed by Mr Gardener, both of Chester. It is elaborately carved to represent the leading features of agriculture and commerce.

Other items relating to John Bright include his writing desk and chair, inkstand and stationery cabinet along with a barrel which recalls a period of distress and suffering in the history of Lancashire. This is one of 50,000 barrels of flour which were sent at John Bright's suggestion by the Northern States of America during the American Civil War for the relief of suffering in Lancashire during the Cotton Famine. The inscription on the barrel reads:

I am one of the thousands that were filled with flour and sent by the Free States of America in the ship "George Griswold" to the starving people of Lancashire whose miseries were caused by the aggressive and civil war of the slave owners in 1862-3-4'

The museum collections grew over the years, as did all local authority museum collections, with donations of curiosities, local and natural history. During the war years both the museum and the art gallery collections were put into storage while the

building was taken over by The Ministry of Food. Following the end of the war the art collections were reinstated, while the museum maintained a presence in the John Bright Room. The majority of collections continued to be held in storage. In the late 1960s the decision was made to seek an alternative home for the museum, and the former vicarage of the Parish Church of St. Chad was thought to be a suitable venue. Following extensive renovations to this handsome eighteenth-century building, Rochdale Museum opened here in 1975. Displays included local social history, agricultural implements and costume. A later development included a live collection of old and rare breeds of domestic animals in the museum grounds. Period room settings and changing exhibitions were regular features of the museum.

The Museum remained open in St. Chad's Vicarage for almost 15 years. In 1989 the decision was made to sell the property for commercial purposes and to close the museum completely. The future of the museum collections remained doubtful for the next 10 years, owing to the bickering of successive Labour and Liberal Councils. The collections moved to unsuitable storage conditions in a former mill near to Rochdale town centre, taking



The two stones heads which greet visitors to Touchstones Rochdale



Visitors and "Our-Gracie"

over the top floor of this building. A sense of local history was kept alive by the remaining museum staff, who developed a programme of changing displays in the borough libraries and a pioneering school loans box service. In 1994 due to the poor fabric of the mill and the prohibitive costs of repair, the Borough Council resolved to sell this building. The museum staff saw this as a now-or-never situation, whereby they could secure and develop a store which would provide a safe, secure and accessible environment for all the Museum's collections.²

The Arts and Heritage Resource Centre

The dedication of the staff was to pay off. In 1996 the entire collections moved to the new storage location. The new store comprises of four single storey units (16,500 sq feet in total) located within a town centre industrial park and offers one of the best museum storage facilities in the North West. One unit contains a technician's workshop, quarantine area wet and dirty room, including chemical cabinets, temporary object storage and

display materials. A second unit contains a sensitive object store, housing the archaeology, geology, Egyptology, decorative arts and metal collections. All these collections are on 'open storage', with a drawer-store system and glazed sliding doors. The remaining two units house the museum collections, divided between organic materials and social history collections. Again all these collections are on 'open storage' systems.

This Arts and Heritage Resource Centre has provided immeasurable improvements for the collections, public and staff alike. The Centre can be more accurately described as an Educational Resource, providing far more than a storage facility. It offers a dedicated study area with object handling facilities, plus an excellent library of museum, collection and reference material. Tours of the stores are offered to groups and schools. These facilities are regularly used and recent organised visits have included local primary schools, Hopwood Hall College of Further Education, the University of the Third Age and North West Museum Service Training. The Museum Store recently hosted the Education Challenge Fund Training Scheme, administered by the North West Museum Service. This programme was designed to build the skills and knowledge of promising education managers, and drew upon the resources held at the Museum Store (objects and reference material).



Close-up of the frieze representing Science, Art and Literature, part of the 1903 extension

Touchstones Rochdale

The museum collections have finally found a permanent, accessible, home for display in Touchstones Rochdale. Taking inspiration from the words of the president of the local Literary and Scientific Society over 100 years ago, the museum space is a "21st-century interpretation of the ancient 'cabinet of curiosities'"³.

The Building Work

In 1999 a £2 million restoration project for the building began. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in partnership with the

Local Authority, the project has seen the building returning to its' original function of Library, Art Gallery and Museum.

The first stage of the building work involved external restoration and repairs. For 12 months the building was shrouded in scaffolding while underneath a transformation was taking place. Some unusual discoveries were made during these external and internal works. The contractors discovered remarkable differences between the three phases of the building. The first section of the building, constructed in 1884 seems to have weathered remarkably well, particularly in contrast to the final phase of the building, constructed in 1913. The tallest spire in this area of the building was discovered to have dry rot, and was in fact slowly sinking into the gallery roof. As a result the entire spire had to be removed, dismantled and completely rebuilt using as near to the original materials as possible. The names of the original builders were found carved on top of this spire as was the date 13 April 1912 – the day the Titanic sank! The names were A. Whittall, Percy Moore, Fred Shore, James Wilson, L. Howarth.

The internal remedial works also unearthed a few discoveries. During work in the cellar a mysterious tunnel was uncovered. After a newspaper campaign we discovered that the archway in the cellar was in fact the entrance way to an air raid shelter, hidden for nearly 60 years. Local residents remember coming to the Library during air raid warnings, and going down the stairs to the cellars, and into a very long narrow tunnel – the tunnel we unearthed during our renovations.

The Museum at Touchstones Rochdale

Visitors to Touchstones Rochdale are greeted by 2 gritstone heads, both of which are historically linked to the area. Both heads were donated in 1970 by the estate of Gertrude Jane Wilkinson of Wardle, Rochdale. The smaller figure may have once been sited at Low Farm, Low Hill, Wardle. The larger at nearby Howarth Farm. The smaller may well be a genuine 'Celtic' head and Low Hill may have been an ancient barrow or burial ground. The larger head is more recent, probably eighteenth century, and is part of a long local tradition of carving simple stone faces on to buildings and gateposts.

They are in the entrance to Touchstones Rochdale because they are both historic objects, and works of art. They represent all of the touchstones we use as a measure of what is precious to us, past and present, as individuals or as a society. And perhaps there is something else....

Where we find such a head, maybe at a spring or on the threshold of a building – it may even do more; it may become a guide and protector for ourselves and our heirs; provide inspiration when needed, or simply be our lucky talisman. All these meanings are allowed for by the history and background of the archaic head, possibly the oldest and most potent symbol in human consciousness⁴

Created by Nigel Simpkins of 'Simpkins Design' and a team from Rochdale Arts & Heritage Service, the museum projects a dynamic blend of old and new. Simpkins states, "On interpreting the brief



Part of the Egyptology Collection donated by Robert Taylor Heape on display in the Museum at Touchstones Rochdale

our aim was to integrate the functions more...of the building into a dynamic sequence of spaces that would project a positive, contemporary feel." He goes on to say, "This principle is continued in the new museum where the design is carefully worked into the nineteenth century building to create an exciting landscape of spaces whilst retaining the overall volume of the original library."

'Same Difference' looks at everyday life in Rochdale and how it has changed over the years; experiences and events common to all groups of people who have made this area their home. A series of displays explore a person's life events: birth, childhood, teenage life, marriage, and the museum even has its very own death's door (which visitors do not pass through!). Traditional trades are presented through interactive displays; for example the coopering display lets visitors catch the stench of a night soil barrel! The wartime section (an imitation air raid shelter) displays a deeply moving collection of artefacts donated by the nephew of a Middleton soldier who died in the First World War. The collection includes Private Thornley's diary, with entries until a few days before his untimely death. The 'Choosing to Stay' audio-visual feature is a fascinating collection of stories from people who have moved to the Borough from other regions and countries. 'A Taste of Rochdale' contains a unique 'hands on' experience - 'feely' tripe! Visitors can learn about local myths and legends in the story telling area, including the story of the Rochdale Goblin and UFO sightings in Wardle! Objects on display in this section include a wax doll, used in children's sick rooms to ward off illness. The doll is probably from the 1800s, a time when many babies died before the first birthday. It shows that people would even try folk cures or witchcraft to help sick children. Also on display is a baseball team outfit, worn by Ken Wild, the only Rochdalian in a team of Americans. Rochdale Greys played at Spotland between 1936 and 1939.

People and Places includes the Gracie Fields cinema (where visitors, on traditional theatre seating, can try out the 'love seat') which re-lives the glory days of 'Our Gracie'. The section celebrates other local figures too, and includes a plume seized from a regimental horse by Sam Bamford's contingent during the 1819 Peterloo Massacre (the plume was previously on loan to the People's History Museum in Manchester). John Bright is also featured in this area, where the collection of furniture relating to

him is once again on display. Local residents feature in the interactive wall, where unique picture disks spin to reveal interesting facts on each person. Rochdale's magnificent Victorian neo-gothic Town Hall, the first Co-operative shop and other places of importance in the Borough are explored in this section.

Hands-On Museum

Our approach to the displays was to try and include as much as possible to touch, open, do and smell. Have we achieved this? Our visitors certainly seem to think so! Since we opened in November 2002, we have entertained over 8000 visitors. Some of the comments they have made include

"Wow – what a treat! Love the interactive stuff – and the quirky objects in the cabinets"

"Very impressive - loved the way the exhibition incorporates all the senses" 24.11.02

"Well worth a look, raises a smile to the face and a giggle to the chest" 20.11.02

"A great exhibition with plenty to do, read and interact with, something to be proud of having in Rochdale"

"Very impressed – love the range of activities – lots to see, hear, do." 12.01.03



A young visitor experiences the "Hands-on Tripe" exhibit

The Future

We want the opening of the museum to be the beginning of something, not the end. Our intention is that people will keep coming back. Wherever possible we have incorporated flexibility into the displays so objects can be regularly changed. There are numerous places in the museum where visitors can make their own suggestion for new exhibitions. We also have a comprehensive education, events and changing exhibitions programme that will respond to the suggestions of our visitors. It is important to realise that the museum does not just share the same physical space - our staff, exhibitions & events programme, education programme and planning cut across normal specialist boundaries. The emphasis is on working together to provide what people want, rather than sticking to professional disciplines. Future developments include a new performance space in 2004. Touchstones Rochdale can certainly be described as a unique, integrated arts and heritage centre with something special for everyone.

Contact details

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Opening Times

From October 2003:

Monday Friday 10am-5.30pm

Saturday 11am - 4.30pm

Sundays & bank Holidays 11am - 4.30pm (except Local Studies)

The Café closes one hour before the rest of the centre.

Touchstones Rochdale is fully accessible for people with disabilities with limited disabled parking outside the Centre. Admission to Touchstones Rochdale is free.

Notes

¹ *The Museum and its Message*, Rochdale Art Gallery and Museum, 1935.

² *NWMS Newsletter*, Winter 1997.

³ Peter Lewis, *Museums Journal*, January 2003.

⁴ John Billingsley, *Stony Gaze – Investigating Celtic and Other Stone Heads*, 1998.