

University Museums: Today, Tomorrow, Together

University Museums Group Conference 2026

Kings Hall, Newcastle University, 15 June

Contents

Welcome message

Schedule

Opening Provocation

Session 1: Partnership, Collaboration and Advocacy

Session 2: Research and Teaching in Public Programming

Museum and Gallery visits and sessions

Session 3: Collections digitisation and infrastructure

UMG presentation and discussion on N-RICH

Session 4: How does UMG serve its membership?

Welcome Message

Welcome to the UMG Conference, 2026! Thank you for attending this discussion of the past, present and future of university museums in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This conference will ask how university museums respond meaningfully to changing academic, cultural, economic and social landscapes.

How do we demonstrate value within universities? What opportunities and challenges arise from working at the intersection of disciplines, institutions and communities? Why do collaboration and partnerships matter now more than ever, and how can we be better collaborators? What kinds of leadership, creativity and experimentation do we need for our future?

We are looking forward to welcoming you to Newcastle for this fruitful conversation soon!

Schedule – Kings Hall, Newcastle University

9.45 – 10.15: Registration and refreshments

10.15am: Welcome by Co-Chairs of the UMG: Malavika Anderson (Museum Manager, Great North Museum: Hancock) and Dr Luke Syson (Director, Fitzwilliam Museum)

10.20: Welcome to Newcastle by Professor Jane Robinson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Business, Partnerships and Place

10.25: Opening provocation: Museums and Public Trust by Rhiannon Mason, Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies, School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University

10.45: Session 1 Partnership, collaboration and advocacy

Convenor: Luke Syson (Fitzwilliam Museum)

Papers and Panelists:

- Helen Cobby, 'Collaborative Futures: reimagining university collections through partnership and institutional change'
- Rachael Durkin, 'After the Collector: University Museums and the Ethics of Acceptance'
- Helena Cox, 'A Room of One's Own – Can a One-Room Gallery Impact the University's Strategy?'
- Sarah Jillings, Dean Veall and Andrea Fredericksen, 'Two Centuries Here: how UCL Museums brought a university's bicentennial to life'

11.30 : Break

11.40: Session 2 Research and teaching in Public Programming

Convenor: Gabriele Rossi Rognoni (Royal College of Music)

Papers and Panelists:

- Adrian Shaw, 'Public Programme as Practice: Building Collaborative Public Programmes in a University Museum'
- Owen Hopkins, 'Radically Public / Publicly Radical'
- Kristin Hussey, 'Destroying Nature: A student-led exhibition trail at the Great North Museum: Hancock'
- Ruth Sheldon and Rob McKay, 'Using Sound to Understand and Explore Museum Collections'
- Flora Kay, 'The Barber Institute: Reimagining Spaces with our Communities'

12.40: Lunch

13.15: Museum and Gallery sessions: Great North Museum, Farrell Centre, Hatton Gallery

- Great North Museum: Hancock: Andrew Parkin, 'Colouring Hadrian's Wall: polychromy on Roman carved and inscribed stonework from Rome's northern frontier'
- Great North Museum, Hancock: Ainsley Hatt, Phoebe Lewis and Alex Boyd, 'Picture This: Someone Like Me – An exhibition using storytelling to explore research and the people behind it'
- Hatton Gallery: Hazel Barron-Cooper, 'Ways of Working with our Communities'
- Farrell Centre: Explore the Farrell Centre with Owen Hopkins.

14.00: Session 3 Collections and Digitisation Infrastructure

- Repositioning Culture: The Garstang Museum of Archaeology [and Research Centre] at the University of Liverpool
- Mark Jackson, Rebecca Sweetman, Nathan Meyer, Sophie Moore, 'Transforming Access to Mediterranean Cultural Heritage Science Collections'

14.40 UMG Update on N-RICH

15.30: Break

15.45: Roundtable discussion: How can UMG best serve the sector? - facilitated by Ciaron Wilkinson, Manchester Museum

16.45: Close

Opening Provocation

Rhiannon Mason, Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies, Newcastle University

Declining public trust in traditional institutions is a systemic problem facing numerous liberal democracies.¹ Universities are not immune to this 'trust decay' and need to rearticulate their social value to regain public support for their 'social license'.² However, the challenges are significant, ranging from public concerns over cost of fees and interest on student debt, doubts about value for money, and perceptions surrounding freedom of speech, antisemitism, and supposed 'woke' politics. UCL researchers report growing skepticism of the public benefit of universities along political lines, particularly among non-graduates. Alarming, UCL found that '[f]ewer than half [of non-graduates they surveyed] are even fully aware that universities conduct research.'³

Anything that negatively affects universities is a concern for their museums who rely on their patronage. University museums may also be negatively impacted by association. However, there is a more positive reason why public trust should matter to university museums. Polls show UK museums continue to hold broad-based public trust across political divides, although among Reform voters that trust is noticeably lower.⁴ This means museums have something valuable to offer universities.

I argue that many of the attributes which underpin public trust in museums are the same attributes shared by universities. Whereas universities are clearly struggling to communicate this to non-graduates, university museums can foreground those shared trust attributes by careful framing of how they communicate university research and its societal benefit. University museums therefore need to: a) understand which attributes lead to public trust, b) highlight these to their visitors and c) ensure they reach a wide-cross section of the public, including non-graduates.

Biographical Information

¹ OECD. 2024. 'Trust in government'. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/trust-in-government.html> (Accessed: 11 October 2024). Ipsos. 2021. Ipsos Veracity Index: Trust in the Police drops for the second year in a row, 7 December. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row> (Accessed: 6 March 2026). Ipsos. 2022. Ipsos Veracity Index 2022, 23 November. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-2022> (Accessed: 6 March 2026). Ipsos & British Science Association. 2025. Public Attitudes to Science. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). Available at: <https://pas.ipsos.com/> (Accessed: 27 February 2026). Ipsos MORI. 2021. Ipsos MORI Veracity Index 2021: Public Trust in Professions Survey. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2021-12/trust-in-professions-veracity-index-2021-ipsos_0.pdf (Accessed: 6 March 2026).

² UCL Policy Lab (2024) University sector must take the lead to rebuild trust and renew public purpose. University College London. Available at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab> (Accessed: 12 May 2026).

³ Wonkhe (2024) The political centre of gravity continues to shift towards higher education sceptics. Available at: <https://wonkhe.com> (Accessed: 12 May 2026).

⁴ See Ipsos (2025) Ipsos Veracity Index 2025. Available at: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-2025> (Accessed: 12 May 2026).

I am a Professor of Heritage and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University. My research is about the role of heritage and memory institutions in mediating public representations of people's histories, cultures and identities. My work is rooted in academic ideas of cultural studies, critical museology and critical heritage studies. At the same time, I aim to connect the theoretical debates to issues of practice and the concerns of museum and heritage professionals. My teaching and research projects frequently involve collaborating with sector professionals.

I have published on a wide range of topics relating to questions of identity, representation and cultural politics in museums and heritage. I am currently writing a book about museums and public trust, and I provided written and oral evidence on this subject to DCMS for their inquiry into Misinformation and Trusted Voices in 2022.
<http://committees.parliament.uk/work/6844/misinformation-and-trusted-voices/publications/> <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/people/profile/rhiannonmason.html>

Session 1: Partnership, Collaboration and Advocacy

Collaborative Futures: reimagining university collections through partnership and institutional change

Helen Cobby, Curator and lecturer: collections & material culture, Bath Spa University

Abstract:

The session explores *Drawing Together*, a touring exhibition and experimental partnership between Bath Spa University (BSU) Collections, Chippenham Museum and Salisbury's Young Gallery, marking the 80th anniversary of the Bath Academy of Art at Corsham Court (a precursor to BSU today). It asks what collaborative, socially responsible and sustainable models for university museums might look like today - particularly for those with moving walls, shared spaces or no permanent museum space at all. The project uses overlooked collections, and invites BSU students from multiple disciplines and Schools as collaborators, to test new approaches to exhibition-making, partnership development and knowledge exchange across a professionally creative university and regional museums.

Centred on 20th-century British art school teaching practices, the initiative connects historical approaches to creativity and observation with contemporary concerns around wellbeing, participation and belonging. In this way, it responds to changing landscapes within higher education and museums, including growing emphasis on civic engagement and public impact, pressures on arts and humanities provision, changing student demographics, and increasing workload and sustainability challenges for staff and institutions.

The partnership is also testing new institutional processes and approaches to cultural leadership, informed partly by the West of England's new Citizens for Culture plan. Working through iterative and emergent outcomes has prompted reflection on how universities support experimental collaboration, including governance, ethics, evaluation and partnership structures that often prioritise fixed outcomes over emerging practice. The session will share learning from this live project and invite discussion around how university museums and collections can develop more imaginative and flexible collaborative futures that build upon local placemaking legacies.

Biographical information:

Helen Cobby is Curator and Lecturer: Collections & Material Culture at Bath Spa University, where she manages and develops the university collections and teaches across collections management, curatorship, heritage and material culture. Her work focuses on public interpretation and creative use of collections through exhibitions, partnerships and collaborative research projects. Previously, Helen was Assistant Curator at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham, where she co-curated major exhibitions including

Cornwall as Crucible (2020). She has also worked at the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, where she curated the touring exhibition *The Young Turner* (2016-17).

A Room of One's Own – Can a One-Room Gallery Impact the University's Strategy?

Dr Helena Cox, Art Curator, University of York

Abstract

University of York has been amassing artwork for 60 years, but only appointed its first art curator in 2022. For decades, the University did not have a dedicated gallery space either. Finally, in late 2025, a dedicated Art Gallery was opened in Heslington Hall, the only historic building on the otherwise modernist / brutalist campus. For the Art Collection team, this was a long-awaited moment of triumph.

However, the gallery consists of only one room. Shortly after its opening, the University set out to 'refresh' its institutional strategy. This came mainly as a reaction to the previous two years of severe budget cuts, two rounds of voluntary redundancies, and the extinguishing of entire teams across the university. As part of determining the new Strategy, staff were invited to take part in guided tours of art on campus, including the new gallery space. While the gallery is limited to one single room, as part of its making, the Art Collection team joint forces with the History of Art department and together they obtained not only the gallery space, but also a museum-style storage space and a bespoke teaching space suited for the study of artworks and curatorial practices.

Furthermore, the art collection team initiated a large-scale collaboration with the Biology department, among other interdisciplinary partners in the UK and abroad.

In this case study, I want to focus on two aspects. Firstly, a celebration of the multidisciplinary collaborations that helped to put art on the university map and ultimately led to the creation of its first dedicated art gallery. Secondly, I will highlight how an art gallery on campus - even if just the size of one room - can substantially transform the way an entire institution understands itself, and how art can markedly impact how the university formulates its strategic goals into the future.

Biographical information:

Dr Helena Cox is a curator and an art historian. Since 2022, Helena is the inaugural Art Curator at the University of York, overseeing a collection of over a thousand artworks of mainly modern British and international art. Helena holds a BA in art history from the Charles University in Prague, MA from the University of Central Lancashire, and a PhD from the University of York. Helena previously worked as a curator of the Japanese art collection at the National Museum in Prague (Czechia), a curator of collections and exhibitions at Beverley Art Gallery, and on various free-lance projects working mainly with contemporary artists. Helena's PhD research centered on transcultural modern art, and specialised in Czech, British and Japanese art around 1900. In her curatorial role, Helena is passionate about curating in the university context and making art accessible to a wide array of audiences. She also focuses on connecting academia with curatorship and explores ideas around exhibition-making as research. Helena co-hosts the podcast "Curator and Keeper - the UoY Art Collection podcast".

After the Collector: University Museums and the Ethics of Acceptance

Rachael Durkin, Associate Professor in History and lead of the Montagu Collection of Global Musical Instruments, Northumbria University

Abstract:

In December 2022, Northumbria University received the Jeremy Montagu Collection — over 2,750 global musical instruments, library and personal papers — via the UK government's Acceptance in Lieu scheme. It arrived as a complete archive: in Derrida's terms carrying within it not only physical objects, but the authority of the archon who assembled them.

The era of the twentieth-century private collector is drawing to a close. Collections of considerable cultural and scholarly value, assembled across lifetimes and shaped by distinctly personal taxonomies, are increasingly being offered to cultural institutions in the absence of other institutional heirs. Yet the question we face extends beyond whether a collection is valuable, to whether accepting it as a whole, often on the collector's terms, represents an endorsement of the collector's own logic.

This paper uses the Montagu case to ask how university museums should navigate this emerging landscape. Existing frameworks — Acceptance in Lieu mechanisms, provenance ethics, and regulatory compliance — address the practicalities only partially. The deeper challenge is conceptual: how institutions choose, what criteria govern that choice, and whether the archival impulse itself is adequate to the ethical demands now facing the sector.

Derrida's *Archive Fever* insists that the archive is never simply a record of the past but a claim on the future. For university museums confronting dispersing collections, contested objects, and estates without obvious institutional heirs, that distinction is more relevant than ever. Acceptance carries weight beyond the logistical: it is an exercise of institutional judgment about what deserves to persist, and on whose terms. The Montagu Collection offers one starting point for a broader sector conversation about what that judgment should look like, and what collaborative frameworks might best support it.

Biographical Information:

Rachael Durkin is Associate Professor in History and Music at Northumbria University, UKRI Future Leaders Fellow, and leader of the Global Music Technologies: Collaboration and Cultural Exchange research group. Her research focuses on musical instrument innovation, with particular emphasis on the impact of the first Industrial Revolution on design, manufacture, and commerce. She sits on the editorial board of the Galpin Society Journal, is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and leads the Montagu Collection of Global Musical Instruments at Northumbria University. Her current work on the Montagu Collection encompasses provenance research, digital cataloguing, and the history and ethics of collecting, including questions of

institutional responsibility, archival formation, and what it means to accept a collector's archive whole.

Two Centuries Here: how UCL Museums brought a university's bicentennial to life

Sarah Jillings, Dean Veall and Andrea Fredericksen, University College London

Abstract:

UCL launched a year of celebration to mark its 200th birthday in February 2026. The UCL Museums & Cultural Programmes team has played a critical role in the successful realisation of these plans, managing the delivery of a landmark exhibition to tell the story of UCL in history, today and tomorrow. In parallel the team was also required to support a major capital project to rethink the UCL Quad and Wilkins Cloisters spaces, which necessitated the relocation of UCL Art Museum and the temporary removal and conservation of a wide range of artworks.

In this presentation we will talk through some of the practical and logistical challenges we faced in responding to this major institutional initiative with an immovable deadline, and the opportunities it has created to reposition the collections and activities of our team and demonstrate our strategic value to the university and its leadership.

It shows how our long-term partnership with The Survey of London, a long-running scholarly series documenting the architectural history and development of London's buildings, streets, and monuments, which is now based at UCL Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, brought greater value to the UCL200 celebrations through shared research, curation and exhibition.

Biographical Information:

Sarah Jillings, Dean Veall and Andrea Fredericksen are from the Museums and Cultural Programmes team at UCL. Sarah joined UCL as Head of MCP last year, having previously worked in curatorial and project roles at the Jewish Museum and the British Museum, and most recently in education transformation programmes at King's College London. As Head of Engagement & Exhibitions Dean is responsible for live engagement, exhibitions and visitor services at UCL Museums. Dean has a zoology background and worked since 2006 in learning and engagement at local, national and university museums and most recently as Deputy Head of Public Engagement at the University of Bath.

Andrea is Acting Head and long-time Curator of UCL Art Collections, with more than 20 years' experience working as a museum professional within a university environment. She won a UCL Provost Education Award in 2023 for her work in developing teaching and learning with UCL Art Collections. They will be talking about their collective experience of delivering projects associated with the current UCL200 bicentennial celebrations, which launched in February 2026.

Session 2: Research, Teaching and Public Programming

Public Programme as Practice: Building Collaborative Public Programmes in a University Museum

Adrian Shaw, Public Programmes Manager, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

*All of the museum staff and facilitators are lovely and so knowledgeable. They make the slightly forbidding space of the museum seem accessible and more like somewhere I belong. **

Over the past two years, the Fitzwilliam Museum's Public Programmes have been re-imagined not simply as an events offer, but as a gathering space within the university and the city. This paper reflects on a values-led shift towards collaborative, interdisciplinary and experimental programming that positions the university museum as a civic meeting ground – a space where collections, research, contemporary creativity and community knowledge converge.

Drawing on recent practice, including expanded museum lates and the reimagining our Education space – recently renamed the Creative Studio – as an experimental making space and cultural laboratory for shared creative practice, this presentation explores how public programmes can demonstrate value within universities in ways that extend beyond attendance figures or income generation. Instead, value is articulated through participation, co-creation, research and sustained relationships with students, artists and communities.

The presentation considers the opportunities and challenges of working at the intersection of institutional priorities, academic research and participants. It asks what kinds of conditions are required to support experimentation, equitable collaboration and risk-aware practice within complex university structures. It reflects on how we might move beyond the traditional "expert-audience" hierarchy to position the museum as a site of collective knowledge production, facilitating a "civic voice" dialogue aligned with the university's shift towards civic engagement.

Rather than presenting a single model to replicate, this presentation offers a set of principles, provocations and questions emerging from practice: what happens when public programmes are understood as infrastructure rather than output? How do collaboration and partnership reshape institutional power dynamics? And how might university museums design togetherness intentionally – not as aspiration, but as method – in a changing cultural, academic and social landscape?

**Feedback from a recent Meet the Maker session, where contemporary makers and artists are paired with exhibition expertise in practical workshop settings.*

Biographical information:

Adrian Shaw is an artist-researcher and Public Programmes Manager at the Fitzwilliam Museum. He is currently undertaking an MPhil/PhD in Art at Goldsmiths, University of London, where his practice-led research explores experimental public programming, museum knowledge production and socially engaged cultural practice. His work focuses on the intersections of research, public engagement, learning environments, knowledge exchange and contemporary art practice, with a particular interest in how museums can operate as collaborative and civic spaces.

Prior to joining the Fitzwilliam Museum, Adrian spent over a decade at Tate, where he was Curator of Late at Tate Britain, leading large-scale interdisciplinary public programmes exploring art, participation and public dialogue. He has also worked as a Senior Research Fellow in Knowledge Exchange at University of the Arts London and continues to collaborate on artist-led and community-based cultural projects in South West London. His work brings together curatorial practice, research and education to explore new models of participation, institutional experimentation and collective knowledge-making within contemporary cultural organisations.

Radically Public / Publicly Radical

Owen Hopkins, Director, Farrell Centre, Newcastle University

Abstract:

Amid the major financial challenges currently afflicting UK Higher Education, university museums and cultural venues are at risk of further significant cuts to already very stretched budgets and are under pressure to prove their value for money according to criteria often detached from how they work.

Despite this and perhaps somewhat ironically, university museums and cultural venues, with their extensive local networks, audience relationships and connections to policymakers and industry, are actually ideally placed to further emerging institutional agendas around building connections to local business and the professions to help foster economic growth and development.

In this talk, I aim to look beyond this paradox through the lens of the Farrell Centre – a still relatively new public space for the built environment at Newcastle University. I explore centre's public and professional engagement work over the last three years – both successes and otherwise – and the question of how we make those judgements – and reflect on our agenda looking forward, as we redefine our mission to be radically public and publicly radical in everything we do.

Biographical Information

Owen Hopkins is a curator and writer. He is Director of the Farrell Centre – a public centre for architecture and cities at Newcastle University. He was part of the UK-Kenya curatorial team for the British Pavilion at the 2025 Venice Architecture Biennale, which was awarded a 'Special Mention' for National Participation by La Biennale. Prior to joining the Farrell Centre, he was Senior Curator at Sir John Soane's Museum and before that Architecture Programme Curator at the Royal Academy of Arts. Across these roles, he has curated numerous acclaimed exhibitions and has written or edited over twenty books, journals and other publications. A frequent commentator on architecture in the press, on radio and TV, he writes regularly for a range of media. He lectures internationally and is a frequent guest critic at architecture schools, as well as a judge for a number of architecture awards.

Destroying Nature: A student-led exhibition trail at the Great North Museum: Hancock Kristin Hussey, Lecturer in Environmental History, Newcastle University

Abstract:

In my short presentation I will present a case study project of a pedagogical collaboration between environmental historians at Newcastle University and the team at the Great North Museum: Hancock (GNM). 'Destroying Nature: Histories of peoples and environments' was a student-led exhibition trail on display at the GNM during summer 2025. The aim of the project was to re-interpret the historical collections of the GNM through the lens of environmental history, responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis while rethinking how university teaching can engage meaningfully with heritage institutions. Supported by cutting-edge teaching and workshops in professional skills, students developed new labels for the museum's permanent displays as a form of assessment: developing their skills in heritage work while expanding the GNM's knowledge of their own collections. Students were asked to work with museum objects as historical evidence, rewriting object labels to foreground environmental change, extinction, colonialism, and human–nature relationships. This approach reflects a belief that museum objects can act as powerful "lodestones" (Newell, 2016), connecting people, stories and pressing contemporary concerns.

In my presentation I will reflect on how this museum collaboration has supported students to reflect on the natural world, its history and their place in it. I will also think about how the project aligned with the GNM's strategic goals and some of the challenges of delivering the trail in co-production with undergraduate students.

Biographical Information:

Dr Kristin Hussey is a historian and curator based at Newcastle University. She works at the intersection of the history of medicine and the environment and her research currently focuses on the history of sleep and circadian rhythms. She has previously worked in collections and curatorial roles at the Science Museum, the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Physicians Museum. She joined Newcastle as Lecturer in Environmental History in 2024 following a postdoc at the Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen.

Composing for Space and Places: Using Sound to Understand and Explore Museum Collections

Dr Rob Mackay, Newcastle University (SACS, Music), and Ruth Sheldon (Great North Museum: Hancock)

The Great North Museum: Hancock is a place where stories are told, museum collections are housed in cases, mounted on walls or plinths, and always accompanied with a descriptive object label, giving a short insight into its provenance. How can we elevate the sensory experience of these collections, and how can we further bring to life an object which is suspended in its historical journey?

This presentation highlights a 6-year collaboration between Newcastle University and the Great North Museum: Hancock. Building on previous collaborations with museums in Scarborough and Hull, Senior Lecturer in Music at Newcastle University, Dr Rob Mackay developed a collaboration with the GNM:H on a second-year composition module during lockdown.

Students worked to a brief provided by the museum to bring selected artefacts to life through sound and music in an online format. This exercise gave students experience of working to a professional brief, researching their chosen artefacts, and communicating with stakeholders. This pilot project led to the development of the module *Composing for Spaces and Places*, where students develop skills in site-specific composition; to respond to an artefact in the museum and create a work to be performed during a promenade performance, leading the audience through the space. The performances are free, and open to the public.

The students' audio interpretation of collections allows an audience insight into the origins of these displayed items. Through sound and music we get a sense of the objects' stories, where they have travelled and what they have seen. The sound brings them to life. In experiencing interpreted audio knowledge of the objects' stories, we further understand the objects in relation to history and passing of time.

A number of other collaborations with the museum have developed from this central focus, including performances of staff and student works during Great North Nights, and the development of a major exhibition due in summer 2027.

Biographical Information:

Rob Mackay is an award-winning composer, sound artist and performer. Recent projects have moved towards a cross-disciplinary approach, including geology, soundscape ecology, theatre, audiovisual installation work, and human-computer interaction. His work has been performed in 18 countries (including several performances on BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio 1 and Radio France), and a number of his pieces have received international awards.

Rob is currently a Senior Lecturer in Composition at Newcastle University. Previously, he was a Reader in Music at the University of Hull where he directed HEARO (Hull Electroacoustic Resonance Orchestra). He is also the Chair of UKISC (UK and Ireland Soundscape Community), an affiliate of the WFAE (World Forum for Acoustic Ecology).

More information and pieces at: <https://robmackay.net>

Ruth Sheldon is the Engagement Coordinator at the Great North Museum: Hancock, part of Newcastle University and North East Museums. Having worked in the cultural sector for more than 20 years she is motivated to make museums, galleries and cultural spaces accessible, exciting and interesting for everybody. She enjoys exploring creative ways to engage with museum and gallery collections and exhibitions.

The Barber Institute: Reimagining Spaces with our Communities

Flora Kay, Head of Learning and Engagement

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts is a renowned Grade I-listed building that houses an internationally significant collection of European art and a concert hall. Founded by Lady Barber in 1932 as a space for learning and a “hub for social and cultural life,” it is part of the University of Birmingham. Its collections of paintings, sculpture, works on paper, and coins are Designated by Arts Council England. We use our world-class art collection and wide-ranging exhibition, music, and public programmes to inspire and connect people.

The Barber’s transformed building will reopen following a £15 million capital programme in spring 2027. Our vision is to be a welcoming and responsive museum, whose collections and innovative art and music programmes inspire creativity and curiosity. We want the Barber to be used, and valued, by our diverse communities in Birmingham, and beyond.

The project includes a new learning wing, allowing our programmes to be more inclusive, welcoming, and practical to our needs. Our Learning and Engagement work is key to our mission to inspire creativity and curiosity and welcome our audiences onto campus. Situated prominently at the entrance to the galleries, the wing will provide the perfect base and space for this growing and groundbreaking programme and for the benefit of many more people locally, nationally and internationally.

Flora Kay, Head of Learning and Engagement, will reflect on this project and why research, consultation and collaboration has been key to its design. She will present on the Barber’s work with community partners, schools and artists and how we are working collaboratively to co-create resources and interpretation for the wing and rehang of the galleries, reimagining our whole interpretation approach.

We question, what does a University Museum mean to contemporary audiences? How can we design our spaces, resources and interpretation to be more responsive, accessible and creative?

Museum and Gallery visits and sessions

Colouring Hadrian's Wall: polychromy on Roman carved and inscribed stonework from Rome's northern frontier

Andrew Parkin, Great North Museum: Hancock

Abstract:

The Great North Museum: Hancock has developed an innovative gallery intervention called Roman Britain in Colour which uses the technique of projection mapping to interpret a group of seven Roman altars on display in the museum's Hadrian's Wall Gallery. Roman Britain in Colour has generated a great many positive comments, from museum audiences as well as archaeologists and museum professionals.

This presentation explores the intervention: looking at its origins as a community archaeology project, the role of scientific analysis in helping to understand the nature of ancient polychromy on carved stonework and the potential of projection mapping as an interpretative technique for museums. It outlines some of the benefits of projection mapping for the understanding of archaeological material in museums and discusses some potential drawbacks of the technique as an interpretative tool. The presentation also looks at the importance of partnerships for the project, including working with WallCAP, a Hadrian's Wall community archaeology initiative led by Newcastle University, as well as collaborating with Novak, a Newcastle based digital media company, who produced the display. Moreover, the central role of archaeological science is discussed, in particular focusing on recent work on the Antonine Wall as well as Hadrian's Wall. Finally, the potential to make further use of some of the results of scientific research on our collections, as well as some of the potential challenges, will be covered.

Biographical Information:

Andrew Parkin is Keeper of Archaeology at the Great North Museum: Hancock. His background is in archaeology and museum education with over 30 years' experience of working with archaeology collections. He has also been employed as a lecturer and secondary school teacher, focusing on ancient history, history and archaeology. He has published a number of artefacts from the Shefton Collection in the Great North Museum: Hancock and is co-editor of *On the Fascination of Objects: Greek Art in the Shefton Collection* (2016). His extensive experience of curating temporary exhibitions includes acting as curatorial lead for *Lindow Man: Body of Evidence* (2009), *The Extraordinary Gertrude Bell* (2016) and *Treasure: Hidden, Lost, Found* (2026).

Picture This: Someone Like Me – An exhibition using storytelling to explore research and the people behind it
Alex Boyd, Phoebe Lewis

Abstract:

Picture This is a collaborative project exploring how visual storytelling and creative practice can make academic research and research careers accessible to public audiences. Developed through workshops with postgraduate researchers at Newcastle University and presented through the exhibition *Picture This: Someone Like Me at the Great North Museum: Hancock*, the project highlights the diversity of both research topics and the people and journeys behind them.

Researchers translated aspects of their work into accessible visual formats intended to encourage curiosity, new conversations and connection. The exhibition aims to present research beyond a display of specialist knowledge and to showcase it as being shaped by personal interests, lived experience, and different pathways into academia.

This presentation will reflect on the collaborative process between researchers, creative practitioners and museum staff, and consider the role museums and exhibitions can play in creating spaces for researchers to engage in public outreach around their work. It will discuss how exhibitions and creative interpretation can support wider understanding of research culture, challenge assumptions about who research is for, and create opportunities for audiences to see themselves reflected in academic spaces.

Biographical Information:

Alex Boyd is Public Programmes Manager at the Great North Museum: Hancock and is responsible for managing, developing and delivering the museum's diverse programme of public exhibitions and events. Alex has extensive museum and heritage experience including project management, exhibition and event development, and community engaged practice.

Ainsley Hatt is a co-creator of *Picture This* and a marine scientist whose research explores how climate change is reshaping marine ecosystems and industries. His PhD, based jointly at the British Antarctic Survey and Newcastle University, investigates the impacts of ocean warming on biofouling communities and the resulting implications for the global shipping industry. In addition to his doctoral research, Hatt works as a marine social scientist focused on inshore and small-scale fisheries around the UK. His work examines the broader societal contributions these fisheries make to coastal communities, helping to understand how the benefits of UK fisheries extend across social, cultural, and economic dimensions. Before beginning his PhD, Hatt worked extensively on vessels in the North Sea and is a qualified commercial diver and skipper. He has supported research expeditions, wildlife film crews, and offshore operations - experience that informs his scientific approach and connects theory with practice.

Phoebe Lewis is a co-creator of Picture This as well as a marine scientist and designer whose research explores material innovation, inclusive ocean stewardship, and the use of design as a tool for engagement and community-policy dialogue. Lewis is currently undertaking a PhD at Newcastle University, where she investigates the societal contributions of English fisheries. Previously trained as an industrial designer, Lewis has applied her practice to the development of sustainable pigments from seaweed, creating alternatives to synthetic textile dyes. This work has been exhibited internationally at both academic and design events. She works across disciplines to make sustainability more vibrant, inclusive, and human-centred, drawing on design to connect research with lived experience and real-world change.

Ways of Working with Our Communities

Hazel Barron-Cooper, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle University, North East Museums

Abstract

This paper will look at how we can help fulfil the outward facing obligation and civic duty of our universities. Examine how our galleries and museums are a platform from which we can show and use our collections and reach out and make an offer to our local community. Examples of Community Groups we work with:

Refugees – How we welcome and engage with refugees

Creative Age, Equal Arts – working with older people and those living with dementia

L-INK – working with young people aged 16-25 in our community

Travellers Children – Working with a community of travellers who bring a fair to Newcastle once a year.

Outreach – Working with hospitals, for example, Prudhoe Hospital unit for 12–20-year-olds with learning difficulties, behavioural problems and disabilities.

Biographical Information

Hazel Barron-Cooper is the Learning Officer at the Hatton Gallery which is in Newcastle University and managed by Northeast Museums. Her background is in art, and she is a PhD Researcher at Newcastle University in the Fine Art Department.

Session 3: Collections digitisation and infrastructure

Repositioning Culture: The Garstang Museum of Archaeology [and Research Centre] at the University of Liverpool

Joanne Fitton, Deputy Director Libraries, Museums and Galleries at the University of Liverpool

Abstract:

At the University of Liverpool, cultural and heritage assets and venues are managed as part of the Libraries, Museums, Galleries Directorate. The Garstang Museum of Archaeology has been part of this makeup since 2015, and has a strong and long institutional history as part of the Department of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology. It has largely been treated as a teaching resource for the department, and a resource for those researchers in the know. Its visibility, accessibility and usability has been limited. Its sister museum on campus (the VG&M) only formed in 2008, has grown up in different ways as a large public venue at the heart of the campus with exhibition and learning programmes. In LMG we are focused on repositioning and reimagining the cultural offer of the University, committing to new ways of working and operating models that reward what we can find in common, and draw on the strengths of different aspects of our collections, venues and services.

As a museum with a small operational budget, a successful application to the AHRC RICHeS programme for the Garstang has provided an opportunity to make a transformational change - gaining both internal and external recognition for the quality of the collection, and its potential for the international research community and museum sector - with investment in physical, digital and knowledge infrastructure. New partnerships and collaboration are at the heart of the work on the RICHeS project Reconstructing the Ancient Past: The Garstang collection of Archaeology - creating visibility, accessibility and usability of unique and distributed heritage assets. Many UMG members have a key role to play in its success and contribute to a growing network and community of practice.

This presentation will focus on decisions being made to strengthen and align cultural value to university value as we reshape our services and demonstrate impact.

Biographical Information:

Deputy Director Libraries, Museums, Galleries University of Liverpool

Joanne has strategic responsibility for all cultural heritage assets and services across the University of Liverpool, including the VG&M, Garstang Museum of Archaeology, Special Collections and Archives, and Digital development. She has worked in the HE Research Libraries and museums for the last 15 years, developing unified approaches to collection discovery and access across collection formats and specialisms. She currently leads the AHRC

RICHeS project, Reconstructing the Ancient Past: The Garstang Distributed Collection in partnership with National Museums Liverpool.

Transforming Access to Mediterranean Cultural Heritage Science Collections

Mark Jackson, Rebecca Sweetman, Nathan Meyer, Sophie Moore, Newcastle University and British School at Athens

Abstract:

Cultural heritage organisations with important heritage science collections face the challenge that - while they want to make their collections available widely online – with relatively limited resources they struggle to store and structure their digital data, as well as to create high quality, low cost, low maintenance websites. Our project helps institutions to transform their digital humanities capabilities structure their previously unavailable digital data to make their collections available online efficiently in-house for the benefit of researchers, schools and members of the public.

Aims and objectives:

Over the next 5 years, we aim to maximise the potential of the Transforming Access infrastructure by developing it by adding new collections with existing and new institutions with heritage science collections and by engaging with significant audiences in order to have impact in research and education.

Potential applications and benefits:

Transforming Access offers resources for adopting accessible infrastructure for storing and presenting collections through websites using customised open-source software and the ability to create websites without the need for expensive specialist consultants.

The data are structured in the Transforming access ontology which enables data to be read widely by people and machines this will enable us to make further collections accessible. Our infrastructure is FAIR compliant and provides interoperability for existing and new datasets by enabling Data Providers (repositories) to share their data to aggregators including HSDS and Service Providers (harvesters) through the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH).

Benefits for researchers include the ability to work with previously unavailable, spatially enabled, downloadable and citable data. Benefits for teachers include access to important and engaging datasets, with the potential for areas of key curriculum need including especially Boosting crucial skills and Better computer education, digital literacy and data science and AI.

<https://www.riches.ukri.org/funding/riches-investments/tranche-1-collections/transforming-access-to-mediterranean-cultural-heritage-science-collections/>

Biographical Information:

Prof Mark Jackson is Professor of Byzantine Archaeology at Newcastle University and PI for the UKRI (AHRC)-funded Transforming Access to Mediterranean Cultural Heritage Science Collections Project (TA) (2024-2031). Mark has led archaeological excavations, surveys and work

in museum collections, especially in Greece and Türkiye; he teaches and researches particularly with ceramics and is also co-curator of the Gertrude Bell Archive at Newcastle University.

Prof Rebecca Sweetman is Director of the British School at Athens (BSA) and lead project partner for TA. Rebecca is a specialist in Roman and Late Antique Greece and is currently carrying out fieldwork at Knossos, Crete.

Dr Nathan Meyer is IT Lead for the TA project. Based at the BSA, Nathan is an archaeologist with many years' experience as a commercial IT consultant.

Dr Sophie Moore is the programme manager for TA. Based at Newcastle University Sophie is a medieval archaeologist with substantial experience in archaeology as university lecturer, researcher and project manager.

N-RICH

Prototyping a National Research Infrastructure for Cultural Heritage (N-RICH)

This session will provide an update on the 2-year initiative being delivered by AHRC via the Towards a National Collection (TaNC) Programme team to scope a future digital research infrastructure for cultural heritage in the UK, including a collaboration with UMG to develop a work package aiming to demonstrate the social value of collections digitisation.