



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

MUSEUMS IN KENT: AN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SURVEY

NIGEL YATES, M.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.

Allen Grove spent most of his life working in museums, and it is appropriate that one of the papers in a commemorative volume should be focussed on the subject of museums. It is perhaps also appropriate that such a paper should not come from a fellow curator, but from someone working in a closely related field, sufficiently sympathetic to the concerns of museum curators, but also willing to offer the occasional critical comment or observation.

Museums have hit the headlines on many occasions in recent years. There has been much debate over the role of the curator, particularly in some national museums. Concern has been expressed over the sub-standard condition of much museum storage and its contribution to the deterioration of collections. There have been several in-depth reports on museums, including some highly critical ones such as the Audit Commission's *Road to Wigan Pier*. Most recently museums have had to meet the registration requirements of the Museums and Galleries Commission to continue to qualify for grant aid from public funds. The pressure on both institutions and their staffs has never been greater.

Allen Grove represented a type of museum curator which has now all but disappeared. He was not just the manager of a local government service but a scholar and an antiquary whose knowledge was both detailed and wide-ranging. He had his roots deeply embedded in the local community. Forty years ago most museum curators, and for that matter archivists as well, were of a similar type. Over the last forty years the image of both has changed. The emphasis on professional qualifications and the creation of courses designed to provide them have produced a very different type of curator in whom specialist academic knowledge is balanced by much deeper technical knowledge. Museums have placed, or at least attempted to place, much greater emphasis on conservation, collections management, display and education. The image of the pre-1950 museum was of heavy glass cases filled with a profusion of objects, sometimes wholly unrelated to

each other, poorly labelled and with no evidence of any interest in overall presentation. Some small museums of this type, mostly looked after by honorary curators modelling themselves on professional curators of the past, still exist, but most have been transformed by the curatorial revolution of the past few decades. Museums have been more selective in what they have both acquired and displayed, more assiduous in the detailed labelling of objects, concerned to promote good standards of display and to ensure that they performed a more focussed educational role in the local community.

Today both the old-fashioned museums under attack over the last forty years, and those museums that have replaced them, are equally vulnerable. The causes of their vulnerability are partly financial and partly changes in public attitudes. The better care and display of collections advocated by present-day curators are expensive. Most of the more important museums in Britain are either the responsibility of public bodies or heavily dependent on public funds. The severe restrictions on public expenditure over the past decade have created service difficulties for many museums. More serious in the longer term is the desire of the public to move away from some aspects of museum management and promotion that professionally trained museum curators regard as essential. There is not in Britain the recognition that museums are places of research and scholarship that there is in many other parts of the world. Most museum visitors in Britain expect, to a greater or lesser extent, an element of entertainment in museums. They are not attracted by serious displays. But making museums and their collections entertaining is also expensive, quite often more expensive than more traditional methods of scholarly display. Museum curators are thus under a double financial pressure, the two elements of which conflict with each other, and they are also under pressure to compromise between their own visions of what museums should be and those of the public who need to be attracted to them, if they are to justify their continued existence.

The problems of museums in Britain are compounded by the sheer number of museums and the fact that the bulk of them have been established in the last forty years. The financial resources that are available are being spread too thinly. Museums that are important in terms of their collections do not necessarily attract the greatest number of visitors. Important collections are frequently the responsibility of owners that cannot find the financial resources to maintain them. For the first time since museums were established we are beginning to see, instead of the creation of new museums and the extension of existing ones, serious questions being asked about the viability of the museums we already have. Some museums have had their budgets and their staffing reduced and been forced to make uncomfortable decisions

about the services they offer. Museums that were free are beginning to charge for entry. Catering and educational facilities have been terminated. Purchase funds have been depleted. Temporary exhibitions have been suspended and galleries closed. A few museums have shut down altogether and their collections have been dispersed.

An important feature of the last two decades in Britain has been the alteration in the proportion of museums that are part of the public sector and those described as 'independents', frequently run by some form of charitable trust, only partly dependent on grant aid from either central government or local authorities, and commercially orientated in terms of the way they attract visitors and they maximise their income from secondary facilities such as catering and trading outlets. Some commentators have seen this trend in British museum provision as wholly beneficial.

'An independent museum is wholly dependent on its ability to attract and please the public. In that sense its director closely resembles a theatre manager or a concert impresario; if the museum fails to get visitors in sufficient numbers, it must inevitably wither away and die . . . for an independent museum, good marketing, good management and, of course, a good product are necessities not luxuries. Our best independent museums . . . show how well this lesson has been learnt by those who have been lucky enough or wise enough to find capable, imaginative managers and policy-makers at the time they were launched. Others have been less blessed and have had to find out about the market the hard way. The independent museums have to concern themselves with people even more than with objects. They are in the communications business. And, during the past twenty years, their methods and approaches have filtered into the state and local authority museums. The process has been slow and unevenly distributed – a few museums have shown themselves very resistant to change – but, in general, the experiments and rethinking stimulated by commercial need have influenced British museums in a positive, and fundamental way, greatly to the benefit of their visitors.' [Kenneth Hudson and Ann Nichols, *Guide to the Museums of Britain and Ireland*, Cambridge 1987, p. viii].

The message has not been lost on local authority museums to the extent that several have either recently been, or are in the process of being, transferred into the independent sector with either an initial endowment, or with continuing financial support, from the transferring body.

Where do the museums of Kent fit in this overall national picture? In many respects, Kent is a microcosm of the nation as a whole. It does not have what could be regarded as a first-class provincial museum, but neither does it have the very limited, almost wholly community-based museum provision of some counties without a major regional centre of population. Altogether, depending on one's classification of what

constitutes a museum, Kent has about seventy museums, most of them fairly small, and most of them established since the Second World War. All three of the most important museums, in respect of the quality and significance of their collections, began however in the nineteenth century. The largest is Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery, founded in 1858. The others are the museums run by Canterbury City Council, founded in 1825, and the independent Powell-Cotton Museum at Birchington, founded in 1896. The other independent museum of early foundation is the Royal Engineers' Museum at Gillingham, founded in 1875. Most of the other museums established by Borough Councils also pre-date the First World War: Dover (1836), Tunbridge Wells (1885), Rochester (1897) and Dartford (1908). The museum established by the Folkestone Natural History Society in 1868 was accommodated in the new library and museum built by Folkestone Borough Council twenty years later. All these museums either employ, or in the case of Folkestone have access to, professionally qualified curatorial staff. This is not the case with the majority of the museums in Kent founded in recent years.

An attempt to improve the management of museum collections in Kent was made by the County Council as part of the re-organisation of local government in 1973-74. In many ways this re-organisation was a missed opportunity for local authority museums in Kent, and the well-meaning attempts by the County Council failed to address the real needs. In this respect, Kent compares unfavourably with counties like Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk and Oxfordshire, where a conscious decision was made to bring all, or a significant proportion of, the main local authority museums under one managerial umbrella. Kent largely maintained the *status quo* with the main local authority museums passing to the district councils, and the County Council assuming responsibility for a number of museums such as that at Folkestone, which had been managed by a librarian-curator, as part of the county library service. The newly-appointed County Museums Officer saw her role as providing a support service for these museums together with those museums in the county which had no professional staff. To this end the emphasis was placed firmly on the appointment of curatorial, conservation and design staff able to offer their expertise to all who wished to avail themselves of their services. The County Museums Officer also established a Kent Museums Group to act as a forum for museum interests in the county. It is now widely accepted that the initiatives of 1973-74 were not very successful. Important museums such as Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery, which in all but name was, and still is, the County Museum, were left to be funded by district councils for whom it was a disproportionate slice of their budget. The County Council had a museum service which ran very few

museums, all of which were essentially local community museums, and whose services were not really taken up by other museums in the county. In 1990–91, the County Council carried out a fundamental review of its museum functions and the museum service as it had been set up in 1973–74 was substantially altered to bring it in line with the sort of service being offered by County Councils in counties like Suffolk and Surrey, with a museum liaison officer to offer an advisory service to museums in Kent and a fund to support museum work generally. The County Council's direct role in museum provision was to be limited to those few museums whose collections could not, at least in the short term, be transferred to other bodies. Whilst these new arrangements still fall far short of providing Kent with a strategic framework for museum provision, they are an important shift of emphasis on the part of the County Council which could be used to at least examine the case for such a framework. Unfortunately, the rivalry between the different tiers of local government has been enhanced by the present local government review, aimed largely at dismantling the arrangements put in place in 1973–74. At a time when, for the good of museums throughout the county, co-operation should be the aim of all, local authorities are involved in claim and counter-claim over which should provide the basis for the new structure to be recommended by the Local Government Commission. It is clear that some of the developments that could and ought to take place will have to await the outcome of these recommendations.

The well-established museums in Kent fall into three main types: significant provincial museums with wide-ranging collections; smaller, essentially community-based museums; and specialist museums set up for a specific purpose. In the first group pride of place has to go to Maidstone Museum and Art Gallery. It has the best archaeological, natural history and social history collections in Kent, its coverage being the whole county, not just the Maidstone area. Moreover, what makes it the most important museum in the county, and one of the most important in south-east England, are the collections that one might not expect it to have; outstanding ethnographical material, especially from the Pacific, the foundations of which were laid by the collections of the explorer Julius Brenchley; the contents of the Japanese gallery; and large quantities of costume, particularly illustrating the history of fashion in the present century, and including the virtually complete wardrobe of the late Doreen, Lady Brabourne. The specialist collections at Maidstone were augmented after the Second World War when the late Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake offered his own collection of horse-drawn carriages as the nucleus of a separate museum on this topic to be housed in the tithe barn formerly belonging to the archbishops of Canterbury. The collection in the Royal Museum and

Art Gallery, and its satellite museums, at Canterbury, though less extensive than those at Maidstone, nevertheless contain significant archaeological material and important fine art acquisitions. At both Canterbury and Maidstone important collections suffer from having to be displayed in buildings which are far from adequate for the purpose.

None of the other general museums in Kent can compete with Canterbury and Maidstone in terms of their collections, though a few do hold material of importance. They are all essentially community-based museums the principal aims of which are to display material of direct relevance to the communities they serve. The Guildhall Museum at Rochester is attractively displayed and contains good collections of armour, weapons and children's toys. Tunbridge Wells Museum has a particularly important collection of Tunbridge Ware. These community museums are managed by a number of different bodies. District Councils are responsible for those at Dartford, Dover, Margate, Rochester, Tunbridge Wells and Whitstable. Kent County Council operates the museum in the former police station at Gravesend, and museums in libraries at Folkestone, Herne Bay, Hythe (on behalf of the town council which owns the collections and contributes financially to the support of the museum), Ramsgate and Sevenoaks. Many are, however, managed by voluntary bodies. The most ambitious of these – and superior to many of those operated by local authorities – is the Fleur de Lis Heritage Centre at Faversham, operated by the Faversham Society and a model of what a small community museum ought to be.

The major expansion in museums in Kent, as in the nation as a whole, since the Second World War has been among the specialist museums, though these also have a long history. The two major specialist museums in Kent were both founded before 1900. The Royal Engineers' Museum at Gillingham is one of the many service museums located throughout the country, the majority of which have benefited in recent years from new display techniques. At the Powell-Cotton Museum at Birchington the displays are part of museum history, one of its dioramas, showing African wild life in natural settings, being the earliest example in the world of a display method since widely copied for the presentation of natural history collections. The Powell-Cotton Museum is a private museum in the strictest sense of the word. Its nucleus is the collection of African and Indian fauna and ethnographical material of the big-game hunter, Major P.H.G. Powell-Cotton, who shipped all these amazing acquisitions to his Kent country house, Quex Park, to which he added a museum extension to contain them and to display them to the public. More recent specialist museums in Kent are the East Kent Maritime Museum at Ramsgate, the Kent Battle of Britain Museum at Hawkinge, the Finchcocks Museum of Musical Instruments at Goudhurst and the Whitbread Hop Farm at

Beltring. A number of country houses have also developed specific museum collections, which are additional to the normal collections of furniture and *objets d'art* which one would expect to find there. Leeds Castle has developed in its gatehouse the finest collection of dog collars in the world. The last private owner of Chiddingstone Castle, now managed by trustees, acquired important collections of Stuart and Jacobite relics, Japanese lacquerware and Egyptian antiquities, displayed as museum pieces in several of the rooms shown to the public.

Three national trends of recent years which have been emulated in Kent are the development of open-air museums, the creation of heritage museums in historic buildings and the opening of what are known as historic experiences following the pioneering example of the Jorvik Viking Centre at York. There are two open-air museums in Kent, both developed over the last decade. The larger, and to date the better developed, of the two is the Historic Dockyard at Chatham, where the opportunity of the dockyard's closure for defence purposes was taken to present this important group of eighteenth-century buildings to the visiting public. Whilst not perhaps doing so consciously, the dockyard, together with sites such as Morwellham Quay, is the nearest British equivalent to the *écomusée* that has been such a feature of French museum development in the last forty years. The buildings in the dockyard are presented as a mixture of historic workshops and venues for exhibitions on appropriate themes. The other open-air museum in Kent is the Museum of Kent Life just north of Maidstone. This was established as a joint venture between Kent County and Maidstone Borough Councils in 1983 and ten years later transferred to an independent trust. Originally, the museum's intention was to interpret the agricultural and horticultural history of Kent. Since then its remit has broadened in scope whilst narrowing in strictly chronological terms, and it now aims to interpret the social history of the Kent countryside between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. It has a long way to go to achieve this ambitious aim, but its development plan includes the dismantling and re-erection of appropriate buildings to incorporate within its site all those that one might expect to find in a Kentish village before the recent radical transformation of village life.

The original impetus for heritage museums in historic buildings came from the need to find uses for listed buildings that could not be used for domestic or commercial purposes. Stimulation for this approach to what was essentially a planning problem came from the changing attitudes of bodies such as English Heritage and the National Trust towards the interpretation of buildings in their respective care. Two heritage museums, remarkably similar in their approach, are those in the Poor Priests' Hospital at Canterbury and the Archbishops' Palace

at Maidstone. The former aims to show the development of Canterbury from Roman times to the present day. Some parts are inevitably more successful than others; the period up to the Reformation with its imaginative mixture of models, text, visual images and original artifacts, is clearly presented and the film of war-damaged Canterbury will bring back memories for many visitors; by contrast the museum fails to provide any comprehensive survey of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, merely snippets of unrelated parts of the story determined more, one suspects, by the collections available than by anything else. In this respect, the heritage museum at Maidstone seems to have learned from the mistakes at Canterbury. It has firmly chosen to use the archbishops' palace as a backdrop for explaining the development of Maidstone in the Middle Ages and this it does very well, again with a mixture of models, text, visual images and original artifacts. Unfortunately, pressure from outside obliged the staff to include material on the seventeenth century which fits uncomfortably with the rest of the display. Similarly, the small amount of space devoted to the use of the building after the Reformation gives the impression of being an afterthought, and the final section showing the conservation of the building prior to its adaptation as a museum, and associated uses, is in a style very different from the main part of the exhibition.

The problems that have been identified in these two heritage museums indicate a fundamental problem in many museums. Generations of curatorial thinking have led to the belief that displays have to be object-led. Even when museums are willing to adopt modern methods of display, they all too rarely make the really essential shift from displays being object-led to the objects being illustrative of, and in a way secondary to, the story that is being told. The process seems to be (i) list the objects that need to be displayed, (ii) write a text that will bring all this together, preferably with a snappy title, (iii) design a display that includes those elements essential in modern display, such as an audio-visual or recreated settings of historical events. From the point of view of the visitor, however, the order must surely be (i) story and only (ii) illustrations and display technique. It means that museums will have to reject the display of some objects, if they cannot be made to fit the storyline of the exhibition. There are, of course, ways of getting around it by devoting parts of the museum to a fairly traditional display of what might be regarded as its 'treasures'. There is, however, in my view as a historian, very little justification for this sort of approach when it comes to the display of much natural history or social history material. Moreover, without a revolution in curatorial thinking, the number of museums that are making the leap from having displays that are story-led rather than object-led will remain very small.

There is, however, plenty of evidence to suggest that those outside traditional museums are making precisely this leap. It has been done in Kent by Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council in their re-interpretation of Tonbridge Castle and by Eurotunnel in their exhibition centre at Folkestone. Rather more controversially it will be found in the three venues in Kent managed by Heritage Projects. These eschew objects altogether and concentrate solely on the story to be told: the work of Geoffrey Chaucer in 'The Canterbury Tales' at Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in 'A Day at the Wells', and the 'White Cliffs Experience' at Dover. This last is the most ambitious of the three 'historic experiences' in Kent, and it provides an opportunity to see at close quarters the essential difference between the 'historic experience' and the traditional museum, since the same development includes a new building for Dover Museum. The museum is attractive, though very traditionally presented, on three floors with archaeology and the environment on the lowest floor, a temporary exhibitions gallery above, and the uppermost floor devoted to the story of Dover, told thematically but with good models showing the development of the town over the years. The White Cliffs Experience is an amalgam of several different displays, the most effective of which are the introductory sections on Roman Britain, built around some genuine archaeological remains, and Dover in the Blitz, complete with its air-raid and all-clear announcements. The real tragedy of this development is that the opportunity was not taken to bring the two elements in the 'experience' and the museum together. The former would have benefited from, and to some extent been disciplined by, the need to include original artifacts; the latter would have been made more exciting and immediate for the casual visitor. As it is the message seems to be that museums are 'serious' and if you want to have fun you have to go to something else. Bearing in mind the attitudes of the average British tourist, noted at the beginning of this paper, it is a message, which if it is believed and acted upon will lead to more museum closures as the money to fund them can no longer be found.

Britain's museums, Kent's museums, are at a crossroads in the history of their development. They can choose which direction they wish to follow but the wrong choice could be fatal for their survival. In order to make these choices museums will have to conduct a very scientific analysis of their present strengths and weaknesses. Even more essential will be a review of their collections and the way in which they are presented. A distinction has to be drawn between those museums that

hold material of national or international significance and those that do not. Some types of museum material are always going to be displayed best, like the Crown Jewels, in traditional cases with authoritative labelling. Museums that hold this material cannot just concern themselves with the needs of the non-specialist visitor. They perform, or ought to perform, a valuable research function, both in promoting their collections and in making them available for scholarly study. Because this type of museum has been dominant in the past, whether it is the major national collections or the larger provincial ones, it has mistakenly led some museums with collections of a very different type to feel that they have to emulate their example. In addition to this the financial pressures on all museums at the present time mean that there must be some element of co-ordination between museums covering either similar areas of interest, or in the same locality. This will enable museums to develop their respective strengths and eliminate their respective weaknesses. A doctrine whereby all compete equally, and only the fittest survive, is not in the interests of either the collections or the visiting public. It is a matter of regret that co-operation between museums in the past, both nationally and locally, has not been good. The element of competition has been fierce, though the competitors have not always been clear about what they were competing for. Competition is a luxury most museums cannot afford. This is a period of retrenchment in which other priorities are greater. Indeed, if some rationalisation of collections and objectives can be accomplished it may be possible both to eliminate duplication and to expand into those areas that museums have neglected. It has to be asked why Kent has so many small agricultural museums, mostly covering the same ground, when in terms of museum provision it has largely failed to explore its maritime history, the development of the seaside, or its unique heritage as the cradle of English Christianity. Indeed, it is perhaps worth noting that in a country as deeply formed by religious divisions as Britain there is not a single museum devoted to, or which explores in depth, the religious history of this country. It may seem a luxury to advocate expansion in a period of contraction but, if the available resources could be better exploited, such expansion would indeed be possible. Whether museums in Kent, or elsewhere in Britain, will recognise all this in time to enable the necessary changes to take place is a moot point. Internal politics, and an inability to see the wood for the trees, produce an enormous number of deaf ears.