

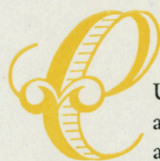
Museums and Art Gallery Leicester

Introduction to the Museum

LEICESTER

1953

Why a Museum?



CURIOSITY, whatever its effects upon felines, is amongst men, that virtue which has led to exploration and discovery, *the* constituent, that is, of Knowledge.

We have, as a condition of our humanity, a respect for what is old, a fascination for what is strange and an urge to discover the truth. This is the essence of Science; we record it in abstract in our libraries and in substance in our museums.

Museums are no new thing. King Alfred collected ethnographical curiosities and the new learning of the Renaissance quickly perceived the need for assembling material facts. England's first museum as we understand it began with the gift of his own collection to the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole in 1683.

Since then the widening of education has expanded Ashmole's concept. Like him we realise the need for the accurate record of the history of specimens, for proper care to be used in their preservation, for their being available to scholars, but we believe too that by careful presentation they can be made to give pleasure and instruction to all. This is the gateway to a field of visual education which is still very imperfectly realised. But here in Leicester we have for many years been exploring it.

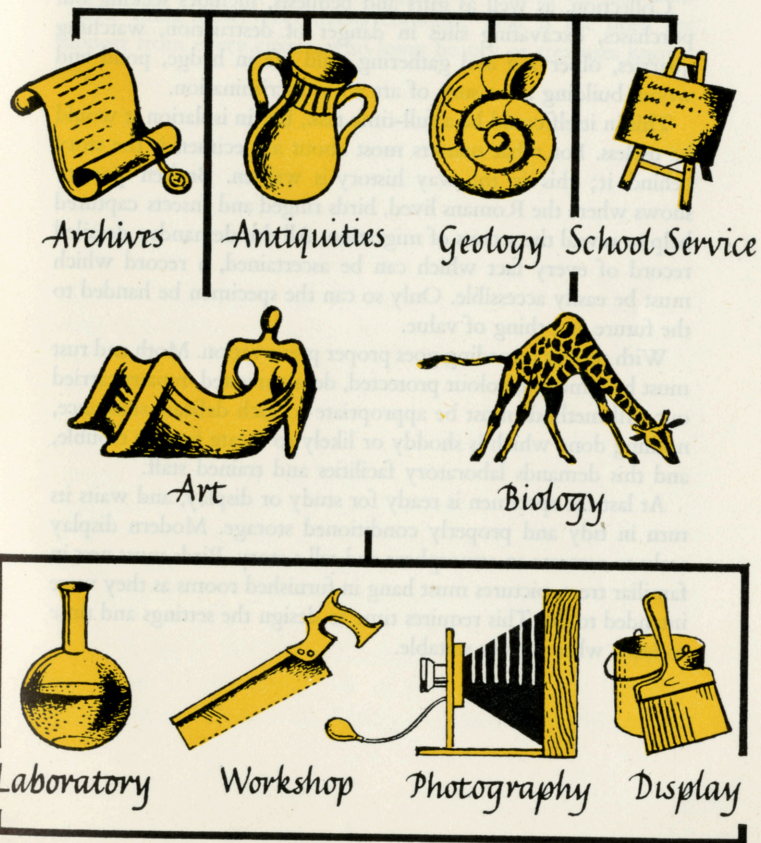
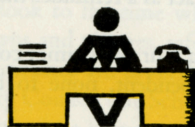
When the Borough Council acquired the collection of the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1849, the idea of a rate-supported Museum for all classes was still revolutionary. A building with a portentous porch was purchased and the collections installed. Contemporary views of it were summed up by the opening, on the same day, of the new Cemetery.

But increasing age has brought an increased feeling of responsibility. Science has demanded greater precision, art greater understanding, a wider public more information. Education can be continued beyond the schoolroom, and even there it is made pleasurable. Clearly such a power cannot be developed without full-time labour and specialised knowledge. And so today the Museum is organized by departments.

COMMITTEE



ADMINISTRATION



What happens in the Museum?



HAZARD collecting has given place to a scientific collection primarily centred upon Leicestershire, borrowing exhibits from other museums as required to act as a reminder that we are not quite the centre of the universe.

Three things occupy a Curator's time: collection, preservation, publication—all interdependent, none to be neglected without mutual loss.

Collection, as well as gifts and bequests, includes seeking out purchases, excavating sites in danger of destruction, watching quarries, observing and gathering wild life in hedge, pond and wood, building a treasury of art with discrimination.

This in itself could be a full-time task, but in isolation it would be useless. For what matters most about a specimen is the story behind it; this is the way history is written. Broken pottery shows where the Romans lived, birds ringed and insects captured help to reveal the secrets of migration. All this demands a detailed record of every fact which can be ascertained, a record which must be easily accessible. Only so can the specimen be handed to the future as a thing of value.

With proper recording goes proper preservation. Moth and rust must be removed, colour protected, decay arrested, repairs carried out. All methods must be appropriate to each delicate substance, nothing done which is shoddy or likely to create further trouble, and this demands laboratory facilities and trained staff.

At last the specimen is ready for study or display, and waits its turn in tidy and properly conditioned storage. Modern display seeks to recreate an atmosphere and tell a story. Birds must nest in familiar trees, pictures must hang in furnished rooms as they were intended to do. This requires time to design the settings and time to learn what is truly suitable.

Nor is that the end. The general visitor may be delighted or instructed, but the expert too demands help for his studies. This entails the publication of catalogues and the writing of monographs, press reports and annual reports. Answers to enquiries, expert consultations, lectures, concerts, all form part of the Museum's daily work.

Of tomorrow we look to the time when loan collections can be sent to smaller towns and villages, safe in the knowledge that their record and maintenance are properly assured. Already with the help of the County Council our Schools Service brings every schoolchild in the county into living touch with all our activities.

One thing however remains constant. That is the need for support from every citizen who loves beauty or treasures knowledge.

ART—The Art Gallery seeks, through the presentation of paintings, sculptures, ceramics and glass, to show the historical development of the arts, and by careful display to relate these works of art to their original environment.

In the Main Hall there is usually a display of the permanent collection of ceramics. This collection is limited to English ceramic art, and although there are a few specimens of Continental and Oriental schools, these are not often on exhibition. The collection is arranged by factory and date, so that it is possible for the visitor to trace the development of both earthenware and porcelain. A detailed catalogue of the collection is available.

In the Applied Art Room is housed the Broughton collection of English glass. It was presented by a local resident and contains representative examples of English glass from the 17th to the 19th century. The cases, with their polished wood bases and draped Italian brocade backcloths, are intended to provide the original background for these glasses.

In the cases on the other side of the room there is usually arranged a display of ceramics and allied arts, intended to show either particular influences on the decoration and form of porcelain or earthenware or to demonstrate the development of a ceramic form.

Also in this room is the main display of sculpture. Our collection contains "Mary" and the "Grieving Woman" by Epstein, both typical works showing the artist's strong individual technique. There is also one of Rodin's studies for his celebrated statue of Balzac. Rodin's practice was to make a number of models in the nude until he found the most satisfactory pose. "The Madman" by Gaudier-Brzeska is a tense and dramatic work, by a gifted sculptor who died in his twenties. A small work by Henry Moore reveals his constant interest in the relationship of human to natural forms, although it is a much reduced version of a larger

work "Head of a Woman" is by Emilio Greco, who is one of the most considerable of contemporary Italian sculptors.

The main Art Gallery is hung with the permanent collection. The room, it will be noticed, is divided into four sections, not only to increase the amount of hanging space but to enable the presentation of different schools or periods of painting. These periods are usually English 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries and one bay contains works by near contemporary foreign artists. One should note the paintings by Sisley, one of the major Impressionist painters, and by Whistler, whose work of the Thames at night is framed in a frame of his own design. The paintings by Pechstein, Feininger and Marc, represent the German school of 1909-1933. As the pictures in the other bays are changed regularly no precise guide can be given, but the artists usually represented are all typical and outstanding figures of their particular periods.

The small Art Room, when it is not housing a temporary exhibition, is hung with watercolours, drawings or prints.

The room which is dedicated to Alderman Squire contains a selection of the best works in the collection. One should note the early Italian painting of the Dead Christ, painted c. 1390, the interesting work by a late follower of Bosch and the portrait by Nicholas Maes.

Of the English works displayed the most outstanding is the conversation piece of the Wollaston family by Hogarth, the charming portrait of a boy with a hoop by John Opie, a rare oil by the great watercolourist of the 18th century, Francis Towne, and the fine portraits by Lely, Cotes and Joseph Wright of Derby.

On the table is one of Degas's beautifully observed ballet dancers.

For a more detailed description of the collection, visitors are referred to the illustrated pamphlet on sale in the Gallery.

There is always a temporary exhibition on view in the Gallery, provided by either the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Arts Council or the Museum itself.

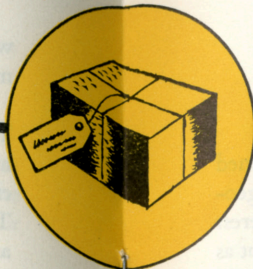
COLLECTION



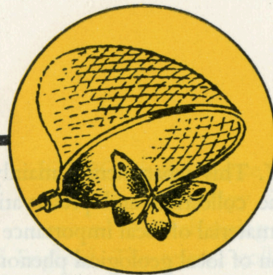
Bequest



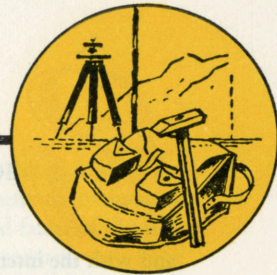
Purchase



Gift



Fieldwork



Examination

PREPARATION & PUBLICATION



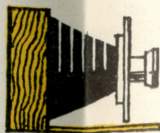
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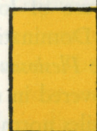
Main Index



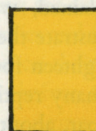
Dept. Index



Photographs



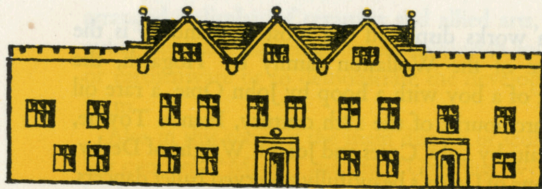
Donor Index



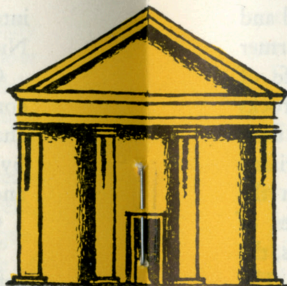
Locality Index



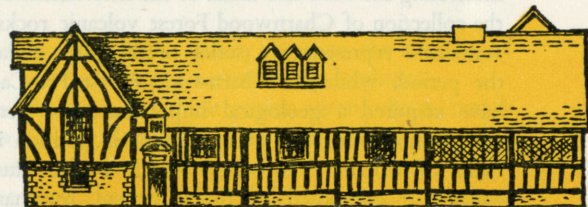
Annual Report



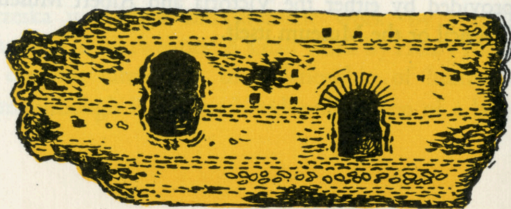
Folk Museum



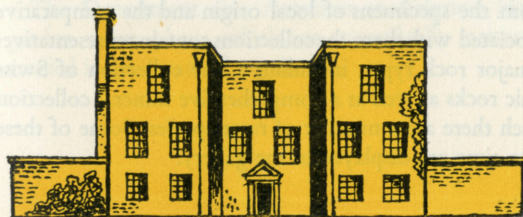
DISPLAY



Guildhall



Jewry Wall



Belgrave Hall



GEOLOGY. This department is mainly concerned with the collection and preservation of geological material of local importance and interest and with the interpretation of local geological phenomena, but as rocks know no county boundaries it is desirable that there should be, even in a museum primarily concerned with a local area, a representative collection of comparative material. For this reason the collections contain abundant material from many parts of the world.

The exhibition gallery is arranged so that the elementary principles of the science are explained, with the use of local specimens wherever possible to illustrate the theme. Dominating the gallery is the skeleton of an eighteen foot reptile *Plesiosaurus macrocephalus* Conybeare, one of many reptiles discovered in the Lower Lias rocks of Barrow-on-Soar, about eight miles north of Leicester. These animals lived in Leicestershire about 150,000,000 years ago. Other similar specimens are included in the reserve collections where are also to be found important series of fossils illustrating the flora and fauna of the Leicestershire Coalfield and the collection of Charnwood Forest volcanic rocks. The former contains a representative series of the plant and animal life of the period, while the Charnwood Forest Pre-Cambrian rocks have acquired a geological importance, not because of their composition but rather because of their position in the Triassic Plain of Britain. The series, which is also illustrated in the gallery, is composed of rocks formed by many phases of volcanic activity. These have given rise to a group of hills, the appearance of which is totally alien to their surroundings. The Jurassic fossils from the east of the county are also well represented.

Apart from the specimens of local origin and the comparative material associated with them the collections contain representatives of all the major rock types, including a fine collection of Swiss metamorphic rocks as well as a comprehensive mineral collection among which there are a number of rarer species. Some of these from time to time are displayed in the gallery.



BIOLOGY is the science of living things, and it is the task of the Biology Department to maintain a record of the changing flora and fauna of this part of Midland England. The reserve collections contain very large numbers of animals and plants systematically arranged for the use of the scientist and the amateur naturalist.

The biological galleries include many living specimens. Local freshwater fish are to be seen in the aquarium together with other aquatic animals which readily come to the notice of fishermen and naturalists. During the summer months the caterpillars of the more common butterflies and moths are shown in the entomology section. They are seen on their typical food plants and are allowed to grow and pupate before the eyes of the visitor. The flower tables illustrate the changing pattern of the flora of the county throughout the different seasons of the year.

The bird gallery on the first floor shows all those British birds which have been recorded in Leicestershire. They are arranged in systematic order and show the features that characterize each group.

Dioramas at the end of the gallery illustrate the animal and plant life of a few well known Leicestershire localities.

Examples of the more important groups among the mammals are to be seen in the Mammal Gallery and serve to provide a comparison with our more familiar animals.

In the Botanical Gallery are series of cases on economic botany which illustrate the use Man makes of plants and plant products, and the economic importance of the insects is frequently illustrated by special displays.

The Department also maintains at Belgrave Hall a botanic garden where plants which are scientifically interesting may be studied in their natural conditions.

ARCHIVES—Documents of all dates are the most important source of historical evidence, though not always that which their writers intended. The Archives Department houses a very large and growing collection of manuscripts bearing on the history of the city and county of Leicester. The most important group is that of the archives of the Corporation of Leicester, which date back to the twelfth century; another vast accumulation is that of Leicester Archdeaconry, among which are the records of the church courts in Leicestershire from the Reformation onwards. But these are only the largest groups—others of importance include those of Wyggeston's Hospital, Trinity Hospital, Rothley Temple, the Quakers in Leicestershire; and there are countless documents relating to family, business and manorial history, and to charities and other institutions.

It depends what you want to know—you can probably find help on most local historical questions, from the name of your great-grandmother to the price of a pint of ale in 1300. And if you do want to make an investigation, there is a well equipped reading room for students, where you can pursue your enquiries with the assistance of extensive catalogues and indices. If, however, your interest is a more general one, varied selections of documents from the collections are always on display in the corridor outside the Department.

ANTIQUITIES tell the story of Man. He breaks his pots and loses his weapons, and in so doing writes his own biography. We recreate him with models and with them set out our own tale of evidence.

The dense woods of Leicestershire did not appeal to our pre-historic ancestors who merely passed through, leaving the odd beaker on the highland fringes, or losing an axe as they floundered in the Soar marshes. One, a smith, buried with his stock at Welby an imported bowl of bronze, the ancestor of all our metal bowls.

The Romans, having expelled the Coritani from Breedon and Burrough, settled them in Ratae. They built a new town, marked their roads with milestones, and even buried their money in lonely places. Someone dropped a bronze bucket down a well at Mountsorrel, an actress loved a gladiator, and a tiler recorded his autograph.

Saxon invaders came and we have their brooches; their settlements are revealed in Leicestershire place-names ending in '-ton.' At this time a young lady died and was buried near Glen Parva.

The Danes followed from the East, and Leicestershire villages whose names end in '-by' show where they made their homes.

Norman overlords built a castle and an abbey under whose walls medieval Leicester cooked, made pottery, gambled, drank and worshipped. Someone washed his hands in a bronze bowl from the Rhineland.

These human stories are illustrated in the archaeological galleries on the first floor, while the extensive reserve collections provide the historian with the material for his more detailed researches.

In 1485, as the mason's hammers grew cold at Ashby and Kirby, Bosworth saw the old order perish. William Wyggeston, the merchant, founded a Chantry and it is there we look for the rest of the story.

Newarke Houses



THE Newarke Houses continue the story to the present day. The premises, which include William Wyggeston's Chantry House of 1512, illustrate the haphazard growth of the English house since the reign of Elizabeth I. Many of the rooms have been decorated in their original colour schemes, and the first floor is panelled in oak, framing the carved and coloured overmantel of 1631 from Ragdale Hall. In this setting are displayed the domestic arts and crafts, lace, embroidery, kitchen utensils, the whims of fashion, the little industries of home and village. Here are the masterpieces of needlework by Mary Linwood, and of furniture by Ernest Gimson and, of course, the garments of 52-stone Daniel Lambert. Here too are the medals of soldiers from the wars returning, and around them chime the locally made clocks, products of a famous 18th century craft.

Industrial machinery has its place, and our important railway history is not forgotten. A reconstructed street scene houses the cobbler and framework-knitter who laid the foundations of our modern industry. There is also an extensive collection of local photographs and drawings.

In the gardens, against the background of the Castle walls stands the old High Cross, and across the road is the reconstructed workshop of Samuel Deacon, one of Leicestershire's distinguished clockmakers who set up in business in 1771.

Belgrave Hall



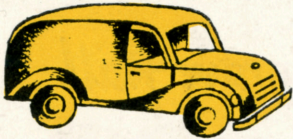
BELGRAVE HALL lies two miles out to the north, adjoining the church of a former country village. It is furnished as a museum of the 18th century, the golden age of English domestic craftsmanship. Everything is arranged to give the impression of a house that is lived in, from the shining copper of the kitchen to the restful chairs and the pictures of the drawing room. Outside, between warm brick walls, lie the colourful gardens, and in the stables is the fine Beaumanor coach of 1740.

Also under the care of the Museum are the JEWRY WALL and the GUILDHALL. The Jewry Wall dominates the foundations of the Roman baths, which are now laid out in an open space, and is one of the major standing remains of Roman building in Britain. Nearby are two mosaic pavements from the wealthy houses of the vanished Roman town.

The Guildhall is the ancient nucleus of our community life. Built by the Gild of Corpus Christi about 1390 and since enlarged, it sheltered our civic debates and legal proceedings for over 400 years. This splendid example of a medieval timber hall is complemented by the carved fireplace of 1637 in the Mayor's Parlour.

The Town Library, in existence since the late 16th century, has been housed in the room on the first floor since 1632.

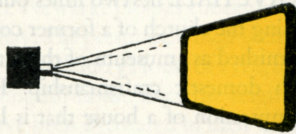
PUBLICATION



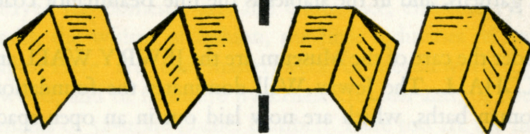
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