

Wisbech & Fenland Museum: The Collection

An Introduction

Walking through the entrance to the Museum you enter into a treasure house of curiosities and wonderment.

Whilst absorbing the fine Victorian interior your gaze and senses are assailed by a stunning array of objects, natural and man-made, which promise to stimulate and inspire. The collection contained in the Museum is varied in character and offers a broad range of subjects including: Archaeology, Decorative Arts, Egyptology, Ethnography, Geology, Paintings, Photography and Natural History in addition to Local and Social History with much to discover and enjoy.

The Entrance Hall contains a rich display of Staffordshire figures and a working John Vise long-case clock of 1750. It leads into the Townshend Room, named after one of the Museum's important benefactors, the Reverend Chauncy Hare Townshend. Half of his personal collection of fine and decorative arts, books and historical curios was left to the Museum in 1868, with the remainder going to the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria & Albert Museum), London.



Chinoiserie Japanned Long Case Clock, c.1750 by John Vise of Wisbech

Among the notable features of this Room are a Sèvres porcelain breakfast service captured from Napoleon's camp equipage after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815; a boxwood chess set, reputed to have belonged to Louis XIV, and a rock-crystal *biberon*, in the form of a fish, beautifully mounted in silver-gilt, a striking example of Italian decorative art of the sixteenth century. The Room also features interesting items of English earthenware and porcelain as well as examples of Greek and Etruscan vessels, bellarmine of fine quality, with an example or two of Palissy ware and of majolica. A series of 19th century Swiss woodcarvings stand alongside a group of Chinese soapstone figures, and over the fireplace hangs a mirror with an elaborately carved-wood surround in the style of Grinling Gibbons.

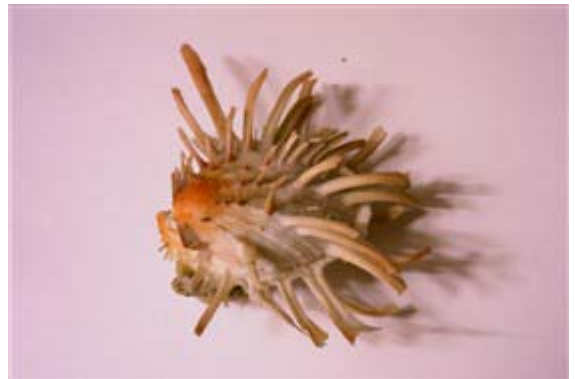


Chauncy Hare Townshend as a young man by J. Boaden , 1825

The mahogany cases in the Main Gallery and the upper walkway, with its fine metalwork balustrade, are a remarkable survival of a Victorian museum interior. Foremost amongst the displays is the story of Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) one of the pioneers of the anti-slavery movement in the 18th century, who was born and is commemorated in Wisbech. His life and work is examined in detail and features his celebrated travelling chest and the contents which were used throughout his exhaustive campaign to convince the British public of the injustice of the slave trade. Amongst the contents are natural products and cultural goods obtained from West Africa, including some interesting textiles, which Clarkson used to demonstrate that an alternative trade should be established. Here we find an extensive display of British birds displayed in their 'habitat' groups. These tableaux were created in the 1880s and indicate the type of physical environment and surroundings used by the particular species and animals in realistic settings and poses. The river, port and shipping are an important part of the history of the town, and this is illustrated with a display on the life of Richard Young, a major 19th century ship-owner including models of two of his vessels. A 19th century cell door from the local Sessions House, heavily defaced with graffiti, offers a glimpse into the murkier side of Wisbech and the pictorial interest of each occupant, which occasionally suggest familiar sights in the neighbourhood.



Thomas Clarkson's Chest



Wright's Thorny Oyster (*Spondylus Wrighteanus*)

A surprising collection of items from Ancient Egypt, many items donated by the local Peckover family, are brought together here and display the religious, funereal, market and tourist-trade themes which reflect the character of the collection. Amongst the notable items are a mummified hand, a mummified cat and an *Ushabti* figure reputed to have been removed from the tomb of Seti I by Belzoni. Displays of archaeological finds from the region, including an important group of Bronze Age metalwork, offer a remarkable insight into earlier life in the Fens and what the landscape has yielded. The Roman period in Fenland is examined with displays of Roman pottery including the notable 'Hunt Cup', a colour-coated ware beaker with a 'barbotine' decoration of a hound chasing a hare. Anglo-Saxon artefacts are found alongside a fine Viking sword and battle-axe. Medieval artefacts, which were excavated locally at Emneth, feature amongst the display. The twentieth century is represented with the fixtures and fittings of Mrs Pooley's shop in Elm, which at one time also housed the village Post Office. The array of products provide a colourful and nostalgic insight into the important role the village shop played within the local community and a sign of the changes in our way of life.



Boy and Dog by Franck, c. 1850

The geology and the development of the distinctive Fenland landscape are examined in detail on the Upper Gallery. Selections of fossils from the Jurassic, Cretaceous and Pleistocene periods are shown as well as a comprehensive display relating the story of the evolution of the fish. Important geological exhibits from various local Victorian Collectors, founder members of the original Museum Society, provide a focus on collectors whose geological interests were probably little known outside of Wisbech. Associated with this subject are elegant displays of minerals and seashells, and items in the Townshend Room reveal how these minerals, such as agates and malachite, were used to create functional and collectible objects. There are also some interesting miniature replicas of the 'life size' models erected by Waterhouse Hawkins at Crystal Palace (1852-54), which represent the earliest attempts at reconstructing dinosaurs.



Burmese Buddha late 18th century early 19th century

Life in the Fens is represented with a range of artefacts which illustrate 'living off the land', 'draining of the Fens', and 'transport and travel', demonstrating the diverse economy of the area. Throughout the Museum there are many objects associated with the history of the town ranging from stonework and woodwork to commercial and domestic items. Other significant objects, which illustrate the eclectic and international nature of the collection, include the marble statue 'Boy and Dog', by the Belgium sculptor Franck, which was shown at the Great Exhibition in 1851 and a very fine example of a late 18th or early 19th century marble Burmese Buddha probably associated with the last royal dynasty of Burma (Konbaung Dynasty 1782-1885).



Clock in Mrs Pooley's Shop

A brief description does scant justice to the richness of the objects on display yet it typifies the extraordinary breadth and diversity of the collection. It is a collection which challenges any received notion of the Museum as simply a quaint rural repository of local artefacts and antiquities and reveals it to have the power to astonish and inspire Visitors of all ages.