

Subject: Lindow Man: a Bog Body Mystery, Manchester Museum [exhibition review]
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What objects would you expect to find in an exhibition about Iron Age Britain? Potsherds, swords and other archaeological finds? Human remains? Oh, and don't forget the obligatory Care Bear and a copy of the Beano. All this and more feature in Manchester Museum's remarkable exhibition Lindow Man: a Bog Body Mystery.

It's not the first time this star attraction (Lindow Man, not the Care Bear) has returned to the north west since he was discovered in a Cheshire bog in 1984. On each occasion he has been loaned by the British Museum, the institution that was given custody of the body in 1984.

Manchester Museum has reawakened this debate through a thought-provoking exhibition and accompanying blog, talks, walks and family activities. While the museum hasn't suppressed calls for the "restitution" of Lindow Man to the north west, its own position is unequivocal: he will return to London in April 2009.

Other things are far less clear. Lindow Man is so well preserved that we even know what he ate before he died. Yet who exactly was he? He died a violent death – but how, when and why? There are many questions and even more answers to this "bog body mystery".

Lindow Man was clearly an important person. And he was as important in life and as he is in death. This is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago.

He poses a host of questions for the museum profession. How should museums deal with uncertainty? Should a once-living human-being be treated like an inanimate thing, an "it", or as an individual, a "he" or "she"? Should human remains be held in collections and displayed to the public?

If so, do they belong in the great research capitals of the world or in the places they once called home? It is to Manchester Museum's enormous credit that it has sought to tackle these issues while stressing that there are no "right" answers.

The use of chipboard, ZF MDF and grey acrylic throughout the display lends it a temporary feel. The layered shelving resembles archaeological strata and includes lots of empty spaces.

This resonates with Lindow Man: there is simply so much we don't know about him. New theories will fill the shelves of future exhibitions. But, for now, Lindow Man's present surroundings are more than adequate.

The exhibition consists of seven "voices". One is Susan Chadwick's, a former pupil of Lindow Primary School. In the summer of 1984 she went in to hospital for an operation. Her bravery was rewarded by being given one of the must-have commodities of the 1980s – a Care Bear.

This treasured possession reminds her of something else: the discovery not far from her home of a 2,000-year-old body. She went on to join her school choir recording of a song calling for Lindow Man to stay in Manchester.

Susan's relationship with Lindow Man is accompanied by the voices of the two peat workers who discovered the body; the archaeologists who recovered it; the curators and forensic pathologists who interpreted it; and a pagan who has very mixed feelings about considering it an "it" at all.

They all came together long before the exhibition opened to share their thoughts about Lindow Man. In the resulting display no voice is allowed to speak louder than the others.

The result is a fittingly human approach to Lindow Man. We learn as much about the now-mysterious world of 1980s Manchester as we do the bogs of two millennia ago. The body itself is treated in a reverential way.

Indeed, it is possible to see the exhibition without really "seeing" Lindow Man. This is because the body is not interpreted, at least not directly. There are no reconstructions, diagrams or words to "explain" him.

It is indicative of the approach taken that the nearest piece of interpretation is a visitor feedback board. Feelings are clearly mixed. One person called for "more hard information and fewer Care Bears". Another praised the lack of facts.

And one visitor proudly explained that she had taken her son to see the museum, just as her own parents had done when she was a child. There is a real sense that this is a community museum and that the community is engaged in truly "public" history.

Some might dismiss the Care Bear as a ruse to bring in families. True or not, it is impossible to accuse this exhibition of being simplistic or shallow. It manages to convey intellectually challenging information and balance often contradictory interpretations. Its achievements range from a symposium on museums and human remains, to a social history of Lindow Moss.

This all makes for a rich display. Much of the information is, however, tucked away in folders or sound booths. As I watched some visitors speed through the gallery, I worried that they might well have left thinking that there was nothing to see. This might be avoided by placing one of the invigilators at the entrance to let visitors know what to expect.

The lack of any overarching voice is potentially problematic. There is a danger that the main aims aren't sufficiently stressed. A larger introductory panel might help here. Another improvement would be the provision of a foot stool to help children peer into the specially designed case holding Lindow Man.

This is an excellent exhibition, but it isn't perfect, which is perhaps its most important message. There is no such thing as "perfect" interpretation – something that speaks to everyone, forever.

Manchester Museum has taken this to heart by not pronouncing the last word on Lindow Man. This begs the question: how will he be presented on his next visit to Manchester?

One idea would be to put together an exhibition about the different ways Lindow Man has been displayed. A comparison of how he has been interpreted since the 1980s would say much about the changing role of museums and our shifting understanding of the past.

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Project data

Cost:	£169,750
Funders:	Heritage Lottery Fund £43,700, Wellcome Trust £30,000, Foyle Foundation £25,000, North West Development Agency £15,892, Dorset Foundation £2,000, Manchester Renaissance North West
Exhibition design:	in-house
Display case:	Hahn
Exhibition ends:	19 April 2009