

Subject: Hastings Museum and Art Gallery East Sussex [exhibition review]
The new museum and art gallery in Hastings has played to its strengths by telling the stories of key local events and people over the past 100 years
Author: Stuart Burch, lecturer in museum studies, Nottingham Trent University
Source: *Museums Journal*, vol. 107, no. 11, 2007, pp. 52-53

On 24 July 1924, Queens Arcade in Hastings was rocked by a loud explosion. It catapulted a Scottish engineer across his laboratory and left him bruised and battered with badly burned hands.

“After this I will wear rubber gloves,” he noted in a letter written in rather spidery handwriting soon afterwards. Its author was John Logie Baird, the pioneer of television or “seeing by wireless”, first demonstrated in Hastings in the year its inventor was electrocuted.

This story is recounted in the first gallery at the newly reopened Hastings Museum and Art Gallery. It features the signed Scot’s letter, together with the military medal that Baird used in his first successful transmission.

The Baird display is a good example of the way in which the museum has chosen to present the local history of Hastings. Rather than telling a general social history, it has opted to pick on certain key local events and personalities of the past century.

These are all well presented in a beautiful brick building dating from 1923. It was converted into a museum five years later and had its first extension in the 1930s to accommodate the famous Durbar Hall, shown at the Indian and Colonial and Exhibition at South Kensington in 1886. This was donated by the second Lord Brassey in 1919.

Many objects have been given by the Brassey family, in particular the ethnographic collection with its impressive array of Native American artefacts. The latter also includes items relating to the famous Canadian Indian and conservationist, Grey Owl (who turned out to be Archibald Belaney from Hastings).

All this explains why the Native American dance group, Thunder Nation, was invited to help launch the museum following its £1.4m revamp. Lined up alongside the dancers were Lambretta scooters, a reference to another event connected to Hastings: the 1964 August Bank Holiday clashes between mods and rockers. The section of the museum devoted to this affair is next to another example of anti-social seaside behaviour – Punch and Judy.

That there is room for all these displays is because the museum has expanded in size by 40 per cent. The London-based architects Thomas Ford & Partners have produced a brilliant extension, the facade of which complements the original building.

Inside they decided to shift most of the service areas to the new part, allowing for former offices and toilets to be converted into exhibition spaces. The extension improves circulation around the museum by introducing sloped walkways and lifts, making it much more user-friendly and accessible.

There is also better lighting and humidity levels. This means the Long Gallery can now house the museum’s impressive watercolour collection. This centres on one of the museum’s most recent and significant acquisitions – JMW Turner’s *Hastings: Fish Market on the Sands, Early Morning* (1824).

It is contextualised by other depictions of Hastings from the same period. This leads to a minor criticism: the panel explaining the motivation for the hang is easily missed. It needs to be more clearly visible to make the most of what is otherwise a well-curated display.

Other aspects of the collection would also benefit from a clearer introduction. This includes the part devoted to Robert Tressell, the author of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, written locally between 1906-08. The touchscreen interactive is fine, but a copy of the book ought to be there for the viewer to look through – and why isn't this classic political novel on sale in the museum shop?

The shop and a small cafe are new additions to the museum, both made possible by the expansion. They have been warmly welcomed and have contributed to more visitors. Numbers have also been boosted by the first temporary exhibition – a display of 50 colourful prints by contemporary artist and former local, Gary Hume.

Hastings's residents must have been eager to be reacquainted with their local museum given that it has been shut for nearly two years (the work was delayed by, among other things, the discovery of asbestos). It clearly has a devoted audience, but publicity is needed to keep the museum in the public eye: it is situated on a hill outside the town and could be easily missed.

The museum has made the most of its south coast location to initiate a shared project with Bexhill Museum and Fécamp Museum in Normandy. They used £200,000 from the European Union's Interreg Fund to develop New Exchanges of Museums over the Channel.

The two English partners have received some £130,000 for bilingual labelling and exchange programmes. All three museums have a shared maritime history and are being regenerated – Bexhill Museum won a Heritage Lottery Fund grant in 2005 and Fécamp's museum plans to decamp to an old fish-drying factory. This is the kind of partnership that can help museums such as Hastings extend their reach.

Stuart Burch is a lecturer in museum studies at Nottingham Trent University

Project data

Cost: £1.4m

Main funders: Heritage Lottery Fund £892,000 European Union Interreg Fund, Hastings Borough Council

Architect: Thomas Ford & Partners

Exhibition design: Ronayne Design

Main contractor: Barwick Construction

Audiovisuals: Good Looking Pictures

Display manager: Beatrice Cole