

# The Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford Magazine

Special  
100th  
Issue





SOUTH PARKS ROAD, OXFORD, OX1 3PP

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**Cover image:** *Multaka-Oxford participants (Niran Altahhan, Hussein Ahmed and Nav Ndhlovu) planning the temporary display Connecting Threads (2019). Photograph by Ian Wallman. Photo © PRM*  
[www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/multaka-connecting-threads](http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/multaka-connecting-threads)

There has been so much gloom in our lives in the past year that it is a real pleasure to be able to celebrate our sense of community as Friends of the Pitt Rivers Museum. In these difficult Covid-19-dominated times, Zoom talks have not only brought our programme of events back to life, but have enabled more people to take part.

There is nothing concrete to report yet on the future PRM-FPRM relationship, except that the first hurdle has been passed safely and it is clear that our events and magazine will continue. The Magazine Editor, Dawn Osborne, the Events Organiser and Magazine Designer, Juliet Eccles and the Chimpmail Messenger, Marian Nichols are all willing to continue. The roles of our Treasurer and Membership Secretary will, assuming all goes well, be taken in house by the PRM. Some volunteers will still be needed as figureheads of the Friends; after I step down as Chair at the June AGM, there will be a need for a new person to liaise between the FPRM members and the PRM staff. This will not be an onerous task, and is very enjoyable. Please contact me if you feel able and willing to fulfil this important role or to be involved in any other way.

And now, here in the following pages of our Magazine, is a celebration of the FPRM in print! The publication of this, our 100<sup>th</sup> issue, has been made special by the generosity of many of our most distinguished supporters - Patrons, the President, and the Director Emeritus, who have each given their time to write the articles that fill these pages. I would like to acknowledge, with deep gratitude, the friendly and efficient help I have received from Philip Grover, Assistant Curator of the Photograph and Manuscript Collections, in providing some of the photographs that illustrate the articles.

The articles are an eclectic mix of topics, all of which touch on the personal association that each of the writers feels with the Museum and its contents, and/or the way it relates to their lives. I thank them all, and hope that you enjoy reading their contributions as much as I have done.

**Gillian Morriss-Kay, Chair of the Friends**



Photo © Studio Edmark

## Editorial



Photo © Dawn Osborne

I am so delighted to be Editor of the magazine for its one hundredth issue after 28 years of publication and to be working with so many people who are passionate about our wonderful small, but exciting museum. From the esteemed Director and staff with the access and cooperation they provide, to all the talented contributors we have had over recent years and our hardworking designer and editorial, proofreading and distribution teams - everyone has made possible the delivery of the best publication possible for the Friends. Not even Covid 19 can prevent us getting it to you all on time.

As Editor I am privileged to have a set of the historical magazines back to Issue 1 in Spring 1992. As I leaf through the volumes as I write this Editorial I think I can truly say

there can be very few places on this earth or topics related to the Museum that we have not covered at least once. We are always on the look out for knowledgeable contributors. So if you are an expert or even a well-informed amateur on an ethnographical or anthropological subject - and what doesn't fall within these all-inclusive, extensive purviews after all - please contact me at my e mail address on the back page.

**Dawn Osborne, Editor**

### New Friends

**New Friends:** Jackie Hawkins, Swindon, Oliver Larcombe-Moore, Bristol

**Obituary:** Dr Nicholas J Allen, Oxford

To learn more about the benefits of becoming a Friend, or if your details change, please contact the membership secretary **Rosemary King** at: [rhking17@gmail.com](mailto:rhking17@gmail.com) or **01367 242433**.

# Museum News



Photo: © PRM

When the Covid 19 global pandemic took hold, the museum closed its doors to the public on 17th March 2020. While many staff were furloughed, the museum continued to maintain its building administration and care for its collections, and to provide services to the public through its digital platform over the summer months. Staff were able to keep in touch with each

other and their teams through online Teams sessions and chat groups. Even with occasional technical hitches and much too much screen time, this has been a real support in keeping us all connected.

Preparing to reopen again to visitors was wonderful: we set about ensuring the museum was safe, with new signage and lots of hand sanitiser, as well as working with our Museum of Natural History colleagues in introducing a new joint timed ticket service to help ensure that social distancing and capacity were managed across both Museums. With the new restrictions in place, the Pitt Rivers was able to operate at ~75% - a large drop for a museum that had welcomed half a million visitors the year before!

As Acting Visitor Service Manager Fernando Calzada reflected after the first lockdown, reopening the museum to the public in these extraordinary circumstances involved a combination of feelings: a mixture of excitement, great

expectations, anxiety, positivity, and of course some concern about the virus. A lot of planning, training and preparation were put in place in order to make sure of a smooth transition and adaptation to new ways of working. What had been a familiar environment was changed substantially, partly in response to the pandemic and partly due to the previously agreed changes to the displays, such as the Treatment of Dead Enemies case.

With the museum closed, commercial and donation income was particularly hard-hit, with a reduction of over half of expected income. To ensure that visitors could still access the Pitt Rivers shop we have joined our shop with the shop in Museum of Natural History until July 2021. Earlier in the year we welcomed our new Retail Supervisor Scarlett Grant; she had just started when lockdown occurred, so has in fact been doing a job quite different from the one she expected!

Our donation boxes are an important core source of funds and we value enormously the support given by all our visitors from near and far, which, together with the much valued support of the Friends, helps many of our programmes to run. We are now finding new ways to enable visitor support, including shopping in the museum online.

During the second lockdown the Museum was again closed to the public, but remained open for students, researchers and back-office work. We also had lots of great activities and exhibitions online. We are all well and very happy to have opened once more, and we look forward to see you here!

**Karrine Sanders** *Chief Operating Officer*

## From the Director

In awe and admiration, I have been following the coming together of this very joyful 100<sup>th</sup> issue of the Friends' magazine. Each season we, as Friends and as staff of the Museum, eagerly look out for the next issue of the magazine, as we know it will bring us so many moments of joy and inspiration. Beautifully designed, with rich content

and appealing visuals, the magazine, very deservedly, has won several awards. 100 issues means 28 years. 28 years that dedicated members of our Friends have spent time, energy and toil on getting the Magazine to be this delightful record of our work.

**Laura Van Broekhoven** *Director*



Laura van Broekhoven and Philip Grover.



The entrance to the Pitt Rivers Museum

Photos: © PRM



# My Tuesday Afternoon Museum

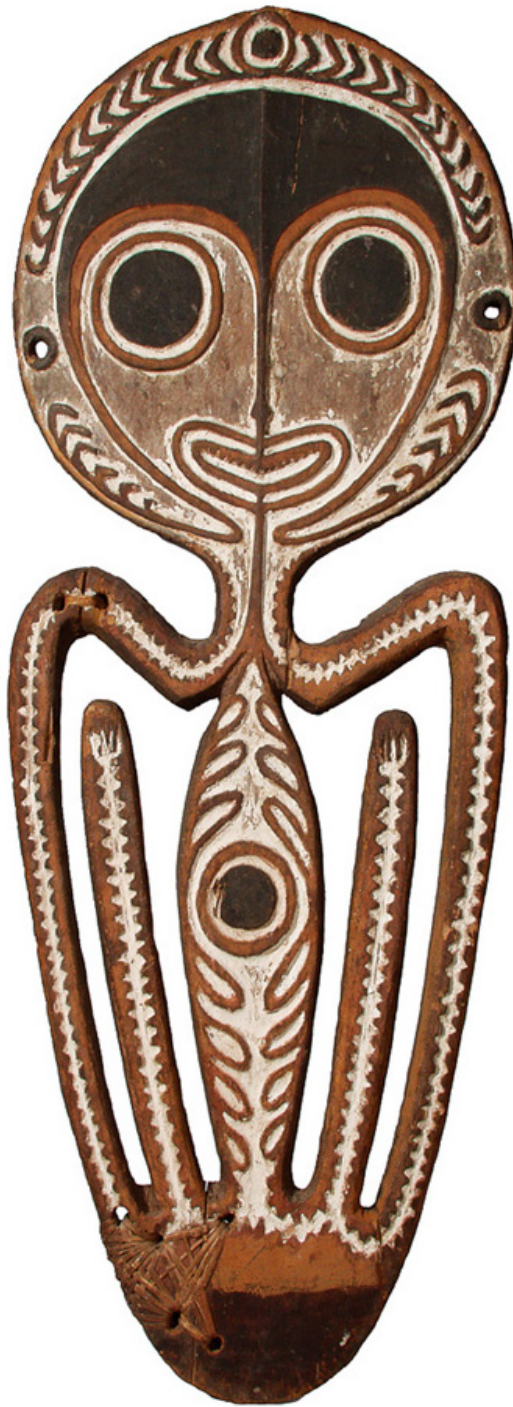
The Pitt Rivers always evokes for me James Fenton's poem:

The Pitt-Rivers Museum,  
Oxford  
Is shut  
Twenty-three hours a day  
and all day Sunday  
And should not be confused  
With its academic brother,  
full of fossils  
And skeletons of bearded  
seals

It usually was - shut. In reality, it opened, I think, on alternate Tuesday afternoons, between two and four, or something like that. You had to be really astute and persevering to pounce at the right moment. And you could reckon to have the place more or less to yourself - just maybe two or three other addicts, keeping well away from each other except perhaps for a brief complicit smile.

My Pitt Rivers years were in the nineteen seventies, when I needed to collect two children from Oxford schools every afternoon, and would now and then time things so that I could spend an hour or so in the Pitt Rivers beforehand, hitting the right Tuesday at the correct moment. I might just cruise around but would often head for favourites. But there was more than mere looking and learning and enjoying. There was inspiration. I don't know quite how it came about - forty years ago and more - but the tamburans from New Guinea gave rise to a novel - *The House in Norham Gardens* - a book for older children (or anyone else, which is what a children's book should be, if it works at all). A tamburan, or agiba, is a painted ceremonial board; one of those in the Pitt Rivers became the centrepiece of the book, prompting the fantasies of a fourteen year old girl, whose great grandfather had made an expedition to New Guinea, bringing back the tamburan. In the book, life in late twentieth century Oxford runs parallel with tribal life in New Guinea.

So, for me, association with the Pitt Rivers began with discovery, addiction, and inspiration, but then, years later,



Tamburan or Agiba board, collected on Goaribardi Island, Papua New Guinea, in 1901. Donated by Major Cook Daniels in 1905. Agiba boards represented ancestors; the skulls of enemies were attached to them on ceremonial occasions.

I was delighted to be asked to be a Patron of the Friends of the Pitt Rivers, which meant that I embarked on an enjoyable association with former Director Michael O'Hanlon, and other officers of the Museum. It was then amazing to see the Museum thrive and blossom - the new extension, new entrance, opening hours that nicely defied the James Fenton poem. But the triumph is that despite all this the Pitt Rivers has retained its integrity. It is still that remarkable and unique space - the height, the galleries, the crowded cases that invite you to wander and peer.

And above all, of course, the content. The Pitt Rivers is about everyone and everything, everywhere. An immense accumulation of objects evokes every kind of human activity through time and space - the Inuit who used the skin of a seal he had caught to capture the image of strange marauding vessels; the English villager who succeeded in confining a witch in a small glass bottle; the keys - that intricate array of every shape, size, date; the New Guinea tribesman who created a painted shield with impenetrable ancestral connotations; the Egyptian bronze cat; the weaponry that reminds us that warfare is universal and eternal; the assemblage of every imaginable variety of musical instrument that tells us that universal also are celebration, skill and creativity. Above all, the global range of the exhibits prompts the realisation that while we are not the same, in

time or in space, there are also so many ways in which we are - we share activities and preoccupations, we all make boats and baskets, we all adorn ourselves, we all have ceremonies and rituals. The Museum serves as a reminder of everything that humanity has in common. I have learned something, been amazed by something, on every visit. For me, the Pitt Rivers has been revelation and inspiration - the archetypal Museum.

**Dame Penelope Lively, Patron**

# Epidemics and Divination in Highland New Guinea

Our lives have been turned upside down by the pandemic. Our hope is that a vaccine will make it go away, so life can return to normal.

Eighty years or so ago a major epidemic struck the part of the world where my wife and I did fieldwork, among the Wahgi people in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. But there the epidemic never really went away, even decades later.

The epidemic among the Wahgi and their Highland neighbours was one of bacillary dysentery. The disease had been introduced in August 1943 by US troops, then opposing the Japanese forces which had invaded northern New Guinea during the Second World War. Highlanders hadn't previously been exposed to dysentery and it spread rapidly. Over 5% of those who contracted it died, despite the distribution to Highlanders of more than a million tablets of sulphaguanadine.

But it wasn't the nature of the disease as such that meant it never went away, so much as the way that the deaths it caused articulated with the belief system and practices of the Wahgi people. The Wahgi traditionally attribute health, strength, fertility and appearance to their dead who, they feel, watch over them, bestowing or withholding these benefits depending on how the living behave. Provided pigs are sacrificed to dead relatives, and contact avoided with anyone who might have angered or harmed the dead person when they were alive, all will be well. If not, the dead will show their anger through visiting misfortune on their living relatives, and fail to protect them from the secret activities of witches, sorcerers and poisoners who are always feared to be at work, even within the clan itself.

One of the traditional ways of contacting the dead, to determine the cause of a misfortune and how it should be alleviated, is through divination. The most dramatic form of such divination practised when the epidemic struck was *ngumb zengimb kong* - 'nose grime pig' - which was undertaken at certain funerals in an effort to identify who might have been guilty of causing the death. Wahgi funerals, then and now, are major gatherings with people coming from near and far to mourn and share the food and pork cooked for the occasion. *Ngumb zengimb kong*



A dazzling appearance may be advanced as evidence of ancestral approval: here Yimbal Aipe (later an MP) dances during the 1980 Pig Festival

divination involved smearing a bamboo knife with grime from the dead man's nose, and then using that knife to cut up the pork. Pieces were then distributed among the mourners, in the belief that the dead man's ghost would reveal his killers through making them ill or killing them in turn.

Here there was a terrible synergy between Wahgi divination ritual and the way in which highly infectious dysentery is spread through contaminated food and water. Each death and divinatory funeral would be followed by further deaths, caused by dysentery but attributed in Wahgi thinking to the vengeful ghost of the original dead man. In an escalating series, the further deaths would in turn lead to more funerals which spread the dysentery more widely still, prompting yet further infective divinatory efforts.

By 1945 the epidemic was tailing off, but its effects traumatised the particular community in which we

worked, and which had been especially badly hit. Decades later people were still trying to make indigenous sense, not only of the rash of deaths that had originally occurred, but also of their possible reverberations in the present. Was X's ill health today the result of his unknowingly associating with the descendants of the witch believed to have killed his father? Might Y's inability to bear sons be due to her unsuspecting consorting with her uncle's poisoner? Alternatively, a man may point to his fine appearance when decorated, (see photograph) or to his flourishing sons, as evidence of his own good standing with ancestors, and innocence of any charges. Uncertainty is always possible, people return with deathbed confessions as to what had *really* occurred, and great intellectual energy is spent in trying to understand past deaths and present misfortunes as an interlinked series of cause and effect.

So, for these Wahgi people the epidemic has in a sense never really gone away. In a different way the pandemic here in the UK may continue to resonate as we similarly try to make sense of it: what could have been done differently? Who was really to blame?

Michael O'Hanlon, Former Director



# The Beautiful Roundness of our Planet



I've had two serious travel adventures in my life (serious travel adventure = extreme weather, sleeping in a tent) and each of the two has brought me face-to-face with the same embarrassingly obvious truth: that the world really is round. That's not the surprising bit. We all know that. The surprising – the embarrassing – thing is how surprised I am to discover this each time. Maybe everyone else lives in constant awareness of the beautiful roundness of our planet. But I evidently don't.

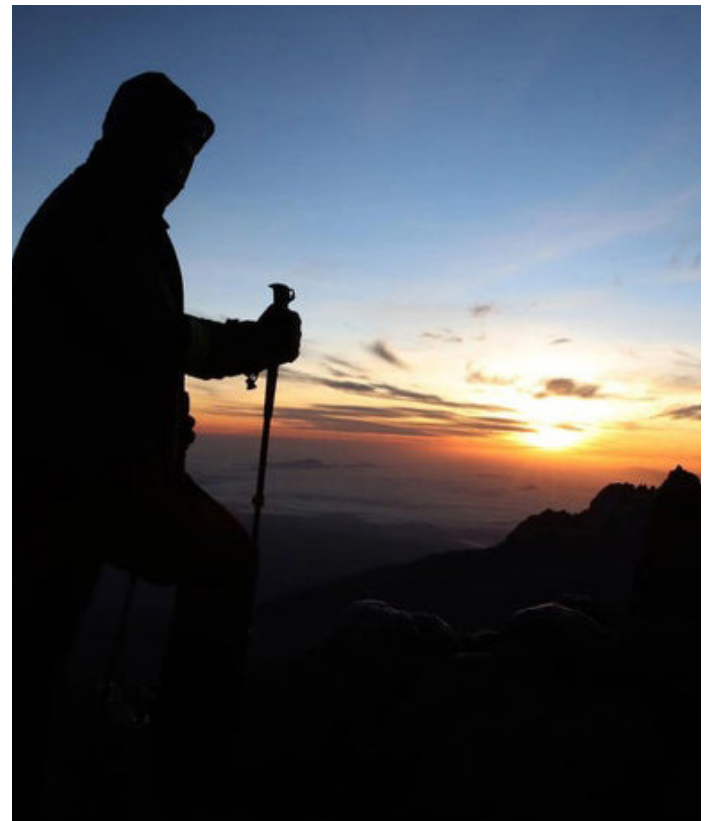
Three-quarters of the way up Kilimanjaro, as the track you're climbing winds around the North-Western face, civilisation suddenly and weirdly crowds back in on you exactly a week after you thought you'd left all thoughts of the real world far behind. The first thing you notice is everyone's mobile phone chirruping and parping, Lazarus-like, back to life. Days and days of trekking up through moorland, then scrub, then funky lunar rockscapes, bring you to a point where the ground falls away and there, splayed out below you suddenly, like an improbable little crescent of crazy paving, lie Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya in a perfect convexity. The view, gin clear and every bit as giddy-making, takes the eye as far as the curve of the earth allows in a sweep from the North to the South-South-West. Sunlight flashes from deep within the land, glinting back at you, reflections off windscreens 120 miles away or mirrors being carried carefully into condominium blocks in far off South Sudan, who knows? At altitude your emotions become soft as cobwebs. We stood in silence for twenty minutes, gulping in the thin air and wiping heavy tears off our chins.

Travelling around the Arctic Circle (my other serious travel adventure...) hammered home how deeply flawed my understanding of the world was. That flat Mercator projection of it in the geography classroom at school was very useful but it didn't tell anything like the full story. The cheeky, beautiful roundness of the world sneaks up on you like a little, don't-tell-anyone-but... naughty secret. The glee I felt on seeing for myself the racy fact that the further north we travelled, the closer the countries at the top of the map lean in, binding like heads in a rugby scrum, until they practically touch at the top, was just further proof of how incredibly ignorant I am. But how exhilarating; it was like that strange satisfaction of realising you've come full circle on a walk. Greenland melds into Canada: you could travel on foot if you wanted from Nuuk in the South-West of Greenland to Tierra del Fuego at the bottom of South America. Or if the seas were frozen (they certainly were when I was there) you could cross on sled to the Alaskan

island of Little Diomedede in the top left hand corner of the Geography map, and over the mile of frozen storm sea to Big Diomedede which is in the top right hand corner. A world away to Mercator people like me, but actually a stone's throw in reality. Across that mile of sea is the international dateline. If you stand on Little Diomedede (and can shake off the uncomfortable sense of being in some sniper's cross hairs from the Russian army base on the bigger island for long enough) you can muddle your mind by trying to work out how sun that rises (ish...) each day in Big Diomedede, won't set for Little Diomedede until at least 36 hours later.

The world is round, nature is round, but we legislate in straight lines, we apply logic in straight lines. That difference between the hypothesised flat world on paper and the actual world in its delightful, plump roundness, must be the cause of so many fascinating distortions. I imagine it's where computer glitches come from. And knowing that makes every frozen screen, every crashed main-frame, a tiny act of marvellous anarchy. A little blow on the part of ungovernable roundness against the squares.

**Alexander Armstrong, Patron**



Photographs: Climbing Kilimanjaro for Comic Relief 2019

# The Pitt Rivers Museum and Reality

All human cultures have models of reality: ways in which they think the world works, of cause and effect, of the balance between physical and cosmological forces, and notions of how people should act to obtain the results they want without contravening any social or cosmological precepts. Models of reality are not just ideas in people's heads, but are worked through in action and are hence instantiated in objects. The Pitt Rivers Museum has often been conceived of as a record of

global technologies, but it is more than that – it is a record of how to thrive in the many versions of the world, past and present. Notions of reality take interesting and confronting forms in all times and places.

An interesting example preserved in the Pitt Rivers Museum is the nail-studded onion with a piece of paper pinned to it, bearing the name Joseph Hoyland Fox (Figure 1). It was one of four that were blown out of the chimney of the Barley Mow pub in Wellington, Somerset by a gust of wind on 16th April 1872, to the surprise of a seated group of drinking men. Fox was a temperance campaigner who had tried to prevent a licence for drink being granted to Samuel Porter, the landlord of the Barley Mow. Porter was a seventh son, with a local reputation as a wizard, who we can guess was attempting to harm Fox, possibly hoping that as the onion dried out in the chimney it would have a withering effect on him. E. B. Tylor, the husband of Fox's cousin Anna, noted that Fox appeared unharmed by this magical assault on his well-being.

The discovery of the onions and other magical objects from Britain in the later nineteenth century was a blow to Tylor's own scheme of the intellectual history of humankind, which he thought saw a shift from a belief in magic to a belief in religion and then to science, each one more advanced and rational than the previous. It was a shock to Tylor that magic still existed in Britain, which was supposedly at the cutting edge of a progressive human history. Notions of magic have a healthy leveling effect on any attempts to feel superior, as do the collections of the Pitt Rivers in general.

Another fascinating item in the Museum is a box carved and painted by a Haida group from the Northwest



Figure 1. The onion from the chimney of the Barley Mow (PRM 1917:53:776)

Coast of Canada (Figure 2). At the bottom of the box are two hands with upright fingers and eyes in their palms. Between the hands is a depiction of Kuugin Jaad, the Mouse Woman, a guide for humans moving from their world into the land of the spirits. (For more details, see the Haida study group's description – <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haidabox>). This box is not so much an object of art, but a map of different worlds and a guide that can aid movement

between them. It repays the most careful observation, and presents a challenge to engage with a model of reality very different from our own.

Like its collections, the Friends of the Pitt Rivers have had a democratizing effect on our views and communities, helping a great range of people engage with the collections through talks, providing support for exhibitions and for individual scholars. As just one example of scholarly support I could cite Gilbert Oteyo, a great friend to many of us, who has carried out several projects on Luo histories and material culture in his native northern Kenya, with help from the Friends. Worlds come together in the Pitt Rivers Museum in ways that ensure mutual respect and appreciation. The Friends have been vital to many people's engagement with the Museum and the many forms of reality it contains.

**Professor Chris Gosden, President of FPRM**

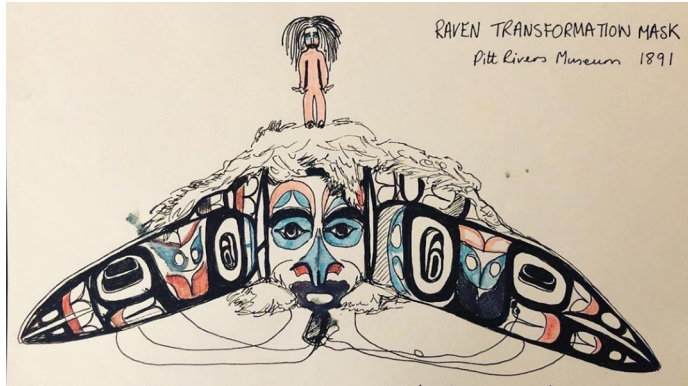


Figure 2. Haida carved and painted box (PRM: 1884:57:25)

Photos: © PRM



# Pioneering Educational Initiatives at the Pitt Rivers Museum



Raven Mask © Laura Everett

Jed (not his real name), a teenager with a ‘difficult’ past, was so taken with the photographs of refugee Syrians in an exhibition at the Pitt Rivers that he spent three days at the museum taking portraits of visitors. He approached these strangers, asked them for their comments and reactions to the museum and its collection and even got to grips with the data protection rigmarole required by the dreaded GDPR.

All this was last year – pre-pandemic. Jed was one of some 50 participants in the imaginative and life-changing Kick Arts programme at the Pitt Rivers. They came for a day a week over a 12 to 15-week period based at the museum, using its unique environment and contents to create work and achieve successes that had hitherto eluded them at home and school.

The Kick Arts programme is the brainchild – one of many remarkable initiatives – of the museum’s education department led by the inspiring Andy McLellan, who is the Head of Public Engagement and Outreach at the Pitt Rivers. “Secondary schools can be brutal places, especially for troubled young people,” Andy explained.

For Jed, whose education had hitherto been mainly characterised by exclusion, failure and rejection, this was a critical breakthrough in demonstrating unusual levels of focus, self-confidence, socialisation, organisation and much more besides.

“The rationale behind Kick Arts is that we can provide safe spaces where these kids can reengage in a positive and creative place that’s different from either school or the spaces they are normally in. Instead of kicking off, they can go and spend some time at the Pitt Rivers or the Natural History Museum.” It seems that some just go off to a room off the main area and work away – there is no pressure to engage with the exhibits themselves, although most do.

Kick Arts is remarkable and it is just one of the outstanding educational activities at a museum that is visited by thousands of school children of all ages each year. I had known that because my wife, Sandy, had brought teenage kids to the museum when she taught art at Peers School, Littlemore, in the sixties and then again in the eighties. Back then, she could usually count on having the museum to herself and her group – that wouldn’t be the case now of course. The museum is humming with educational



The Museum © Sasha Leech

activities and although it provides help and facilities for plenty of primary schools and other ages, it has developed an unusual specialism in its links with secondary schools and their students.

Andy is especially enthusiastic about the art teachers’ scheme that has been developed at the Pitt Rivers. Working with Oxford Brookes University’s MA course for art teachers, the museum has developed a two-day immersive experience for helping teachers get back into producing their own creative work, using the resources of the museum as inspiration and stimulus (see examples above). “The trouble with teaching is that it can suck you dry creatively. Getting back to your own artistic work can renew you and your teaching and your ability to inspire.”

The lockdown and the pandemic have been bad news for museums and the Pitt Rivers was closed for several months with the team on furlough. Andy has been using virtual Zoom meetings to keep the work going and, ever the optimist, he hopes to hold face-to-face sessions in Spring with the Kick Arts group back in the museum. As he said, the lockdown had a corrosive effect on most school children but the kids in the Kick Arts programme are the ones who have fared the worst during this difficult time.

**Danby Bloch, Patron**



Marenka Thompson-Odlum (PRM) and Rachel Payne (Oxford Brookes University) delivering the virtual artist teacher course.

Photo: © PRM



# Major-General Lane Fox (Pitt Rivers) in Brittany



Pitt Rivers

In autumn 1878 and spring 1879 Major-General Lane Fox, who was to take the name Pitt Rivers when he inherited the Dorset/Wiltshire Rushmore estate in 1880, made two extended trips to Brittany, where he spent much of his time visiting the megalithic monuments for which the region was famous. Ten years earlier he had attended a lecture on the state of the Breton megaliths given by William Collings Lukis, and had agreed to be on a committee with the task of conserving them. He now had a chance to see the monuments for himself.

On his first trip, in October and November 1878, he spent much of the time in the Morbihan, in the south of the region, where the best megaliths are concentrated, returning to Dinard on the north coast at the end of his trip. The next year, in March and April, he was more adventurous. Starting at Dinan in the north he travelled across the peninsula to Auray in Morbihan before making his way along the south coast to Finistère and then through the centre of the peninsula to the Côte d'Amor. We know of the outline of these two journeys from two of his notebooks, now preserved in the Public Record Office.

For many European travellers at this time, Brittany represented 'la vie sauvage' – it was entirely "other" – a primitive world to be wondered at. For Pitt Rivers, having dutifully recorded a number of megalithic tombs, it quickly became a place to practice his skills as an ethnographer and collector. These two brief visits generated a varied array of artefacts, which now form an invaluable part of the founding collection of the Pitt Rivers Museum. He approached the Bretons in the same way that an ethnographer would have observed a tribe in any part of the world. The collection includes 350 photographs of the inhabitants and 30 of their skulls (how acquired is not recorded). Dress was represented by a collection of women's lace coiffes (head-dresses), which showed stylistic differences from region to region, embroidery, waistcoats, embroidered slippers, sabots (wooden clogs), as well as a number of

rings and other ornaments. To represent cooking, he chose the wooden implements used to make crêpes and a coffee mill. Musical instruments were represented by the biniou (the Breton bagpipe) and the bombard (a reeded woodwind instrument), basic to the raucous music of Brittany. Visiting pottery workshops in Quimper and Morlaix he acquired a variety of tools and while at St-Suliac he could not resist two anchors made of stone and wood.

But it was the belief systems of the people that really intrigued him. The Bretons were ardent Catholics but their lives were pervaded by superstitions originating in pre-Christian times. At Auray he collected wax models of arms, legs, heads, ears, breasts and a child, left by supplicants to draw the attention of the local saint to the parts of their anatomies requiring her curative powers. At the church at St-Herbot, in Finisère, he collected a number of amber beads which, he records, "in uneven numbers were worn around the neck to cure sore throats", and glass beads "worn by peasants for the good of their eyes". In the same churchyard he came across a "cow's tail blessed by a priest" which was to be cut up and mixed with cattle food to cure the animals. Clearly, churches were prolific places to collect. When he visited the church of St-Léonard at Guingamp he learned that here "snails were used as a cure for fever". Needless to say he could not resist bringing back a small cotton bag containing earth, plant fibres and snail shells.

Pitt Rivers' Breton collection gives a fascinating insight into the man as a collector and, in particular, his desire to understand the beliefs of the country people. His amber beads and bag of earth and snails may not be spectacular, but they take us deep into the world of the peasant rooted in the remote Breton countryside.

**Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe, Patron**



Collection Villiers, Quimper  
1399. - Intérieur d'une Crêperie en BRETAGNE

Breton Crêperie

Photos: © PRM



# The Art of Memory, or Here is Everything

Over fifty years ago, when I was supposed to be reading English as an undergraduate at Exeter College, I spent a lot of time just drifting about in the extraordinary city of Oxford, going into every building that wasn't shut against me, wandering through streets and squares that have since vanished entirely, such as the area known as Paradise (Paradise lost, indeed).

And one day I found myself in the rooms underneath the Town Hall, which then housed the public library. Naturally I joined straight away. I used it a great deal more than the Bodleian, which I found mysterious and intimidating, and where thrillers were harder to find than they were under the Town Hall. It was there where I first came across the work of Frances Yates, the scholar of many curious byways of Renaissance thought and esoteric philosophy. Her book *The Art of Memory* made a particular impression on me, and that is what brings me to the Pitt Rivers Museum.

A museum, of course, is a shrine or temple to the Muses, and the mother of the Muses was Mnemosyne, or Memory. Frances Yates's book about memory deals very vividly (indeed, memorably) with various memory-techniques used by orators and philosophers from classical times to the Renaissance. One of the most famous was a device called the Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo, in which everything it was possible to remember was arranged as if on the stage of a great theatre, in regular rows and columns visible to a spectator. By learning it all by heart, you could make a speech on any subject by imagining each stage in your argument placed in one of the positions in the theatre. It would be wonderful if it had worked.

But Camillo's Memory Theatre, like other aspects of Mnemosyne, lies behind the idea of every kind of museum, I think the Pitt Rivers more than most. Here is – everything. It might not be arranged as Camillo would have done it, but it is arranged; the impression that many visitors have on first

entering that wonder-filled space behind the dinosaurs, that this is a sort of sublimely heterogeneous jumble sale, soon vanishes as a sense of order and purpose takes over. The things in this cabinet surely can't have anything in common – here's a tortoise shell, here's a tin can, here's a plank with nails in it – and yet they do: they're all musical instruments.

What's this modern-looking anorak made of transparent plastic doing here? Oh, but it's not plastic, it's seal intestine – look at the fineness of the stitching! And it's here because it comes from the Arctic, like those odd-looking goggles with the slits in them for shielding the eyes against the glare of the sun on the snow.

And gradually we find ourselves, whether we're seeing it all for the first time or the hundredth, overcome with awe at the immense range of human inventiveness and ingenuity collected and explained for us. It's like the memory of the entire human race. And it includes, of course, in some of the captions in tiny writing on white card, the memory of attitudes that once prevailed among collectors and scholars and teachers and students, points of view that we now find uncomfortable to be reminded of; and the memory of the entire human race also includes some exhibits of a kind that we would almost certainly never collect and display if we were beginning now: human remains, famously.

But is returning such things as shrunken heads to the communities they came from the same as forgetting them and everything they mean? If the museum is a palace of memory, shouldn't it contain and preserve things that do us little credit as well as things we treasure? That questions like this are being seriously discussed in many museums is a tribute to the inexhaustible vigour of inquiry, and curiosity, and moral wonder, and to the centrality of memory.

**Sir Philip Pullman, Patron**



*Inuit hooded coat made from seal intestine with embroidered cuffs and hem. PRM 1908.73.1*



# A Treasure Trove for All Ages and All People

I cannot understate how brilliant the Pitt Rivers Museum is. I absolutely love visiting when I get the chance - in fact, it is the first place I take people when they come to visit me. As one of Oxford's MPs I love showing the place off. The building itself is stunning, and the unique approach to cultivating its half a million objects, right down to the evocative old labels,



*Searching for artefacts at a special event for "Curious Curators"*

is always a joy to see. The place emanates a sense of history, not just through the objects themselves, but also through the sense that we are following in the footsteps of 140 years of previous visitors. It is hard to imagine the excitement the museum's original visitors must have experienced a century before the internet.

Oxford residents are, of course, spoiled for choice. Alongside the Pitt Rivers Museum, they can also visit a wide range of other museums, from the cutting-edge art of Modern Art Oxford to Oxford University's Museum of Natural History. I am so thankful for these great institutions in and near my constituency, and the great cultural value they bring to Oxford, to the surrounding area and to the many thousands of visitors from further afield. Despite this formidable competition, the uniqueness of the Pitt Rivers stands out every time, and its website and virtual events have made it accessible worldwide.

We cannot underestimate the value of museums: they are a great way for people to meet, to volunteer and to find new interests; they help to generate tourism and they broaden our understanding of the world around us. How we have missed them during the pandemic! It is incredibly important that these venues continue to exist post-Covid-19, despite the pressure on finances. I will continue to push the Government to support the arts, so they remain once this tough time is over.

Museums play an essential role in society for both adults and children (see illustrations). As a former teacher, I understand the importance of institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in bringing history to life in a way that listening to a teacher in a classroom sometimes can't. We live in an era of major challenges, including animal conservation and fighting the climate crisis. The Pitt Rivers Museum plays a key educational role here, through the school and group visits it hosts. I have been particularly impressed with the digital events that have been put on during the Covid-19 pandemic, showing that while the building may hold treasures of the past, it does not shy away from adapting to the future.

I have recently set up an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Conservation, People and Places, which will, as well as many other topics, be looking at the effects of the Black Lives Matter movement on historical monuments, something that is currently very pertinent to Oxford. I was very glad to see that the Pitt Rivers Museum is tackling this issue head on and considering how to provide more context in

some of its displays. I applaud the efforts to engage with our colonial past, to acknowledge our uncomfortable place in it, and to move forward together. Black Lives Matter was a turning point in this country: above all, the movement demands actions not just words. The Pitt Rivers has heeded this call and is leading from the front.

Thank you to the Friends of Pitt Rivers Museum for all the work you do, the events you put on and the additions you make the community in Oxford. I am very grateful for your work. I wish you the best of luck with your endeavours and I hope to see you at the museum soon!

**Layla Moran MP, Patron**



*Multaka-Oxford volunteers working with the Jenny Balfour-Paul collection of textiles from the Arab world to plan the temporary display 'Connecting Threads' (2019). See page 2.*

All Photos: © PRM

# INFORMATION SHEET

The Friends' Magazine is published three times a year

## INFORMATION

### Friends

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**Annual Subscription:** £30 (Joint: £40);  
Family (two adults and all their children  
under 18 living at the same address): £40;  
Over 65: £20 (Joint: £30); Student: £15 (18-25,  
in full time education).

**Life Membership:** (for 65+): £200.

Subscription year from 1 May.

First subscription paid after 1 January valid  
to 30 April of following year.

**President of Friends of Pitt Rivers:**

Professor Chris Gosden

**Patrons of Friends of Pitt Rivers:**

Alexander Armstrong, Sir David  
Attenborough, Danby Bloch, Professor  
Sir Barry Cunliffe, Dame Penelope Lively,  
Layla Moran MP, Sir Michael Palin, Sir Philip  
Pullman.

### Museum

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Email: [ea@prm.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ea@prm.ox.ac.uk)

Open: Tuesday-Sunday 10.00-16.30

Monday 12.00-16.30

Admission FREE.

**Highlight tours**

**Wednesdays 14.30 and 15.15**

Volunteer-led introduction to the Museum.

Approximately 20 minutes.

No booking required.

**After Hours**

Occasional themed evening events.

**All museum events:** see [www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events](http://www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events)

### Magazine

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Magazine are Friends unless otherwise stated.  
For further information see:

[www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events](http://www.prm.web.ox.ac.uk/events)

## MUSEUM DIARY DATES

As we go to print The PRM is open  
to the public from 5 December.  
To ensure safety of visitors and staff,  
entry will be ticketed and a reduced  
capacity to meet the 2 metre rule.  
Please plan your visit by booking a  
pre-timed ticket online. Visitors will be  
asked to wear masks and directed to  
hand gel points in the museum. While  
it will be a little different the staff at the  
museum are working to ensure you  
have a pleasant experience. Due to  
restrictions on the upper floors only the  
Ground Floor will be open to visitors.

## Exhibitions and case displays

### Located throughout the galleries

#### Losing Venus:

Installations by  
artist Matt Smith  
highlights the  
colonial impact on  
LGBTQ+ lives across  
the British Empire.



The Cook service by Matt  
Smith

Photo: © Matt Smith

### Archive Case

#### Memoirs in my suitcase:

Display relating to the  
lives and experience  
of Turkish migrant  
workers in Western  
Europe in the 1960s  
and 1970s.



Memoirs in my suitcase

Photo: © PRM

### PRM Website

#### Virtual Tour

Wander the galleries with a virtual visit to  
the museum. Presented by V21 Artspace.



Display cases at PRM

Photo: © PRM

## FRIENDS' DIARY DATES

Unfortunately, all live FPRM events  
are now cancelled for the foreseeable  
future. This is due to the COVID-19  
pandemic and the risks entailed.  
Future talks will be held on Zoom.  
Information for home to access these  
talks to follow via chimpmail. An easy  
way to watch and enjoy the speakers  
lined up from the comfort of your  
home!

### Talk: Curating Culture in a Digital Age.

**20th January 2021**

**Wednesday 18.00**

**Richard Ovenden,**

Bodley's librarian,  
will consider the  
changing role of  
libraries and  
archives, and the  
critical part they  
play in supporting  
open societies,  
in a world where  
digital information  
surrounds and  
overwhelms us.



Richard Ovenden

Photo: © Bodleian Library

### Talk: A history of the Raleigh Bicycle company and cycling for health in 1885

**17th February 2021**

**Wednesday 18.00**

**Tony Hadland**

is an Oxfordshire  
author who has  
written many  
books on bicycle  
history and  
design.



Sir Frank Bowden  
Image from Cycling for Health  
by Frank Bowden published 1913

Should you know of a person or a subject  
that would interest our audience, and to  
request further information, please contact  
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