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Straight from the horse's mouth: Lessons from a recent redevelopment project



Juliane Gregg, Conservator & Briony Jackson, Science Officer



The redevelopment of the National Horseracing Museum has been over ten years in the making but now in the final snagging stages we can look back on what has been an eye-opening but inspiring project. The original museum opened on Newmarket High Street in 1983 and over the years had decidedly outgrown the building. A new home, in the heart of Newmarket, Suffolk, was identified comprising of one of the oldest yards in the country that had been vacant since 1985. This also included the remaining section of Charles' II Palace that was being used as the Tourist Information Office. The increased space has allowed us to showcase the nationally important museum collections and provide new outlets for both the British Sporting Art Trust and the Retraining of Racehorses charity. The museum displays have a new emphasis on Science and Education with a focus on enabling people to understand and value their heritage by engaging with our collections and buildings. This broadened remit created unique trials and tribulations as there has been no significant



Palace House, the Trainer's House and the King's Yard before renovation (left) and (right) just before opening.

Challenges

New science displays - The redevelopment project gave over whole galleries to science topics. This was a fantastic opportunity to expand science content. However, it also presented challenges due to the volume of new content to generate, the complex topics we wanted to present and the limited number of natural science specimens we had in the collection to accompany them.

Limited Natural Science collections - We needed to source loans that would give depth and context to displays. This was a great opportunity to explore other collections but there was added cost for conservation and transport.

New collection - The natural science specimens we did have were part of a newly acquired collection which had not been catalogued and needed to be assessed and prepared for display.

Mixed displays - Some displays combined natural science specimens with other material objects.



Veterinary Collection volunteers cleaning and cataloguing the varied Robert's collection ready for display.

Overcoming challenges

Limited natural science collections - Although we lacked natural science collections to support these topics it gave us an opportunity to work with other museums to borrow their collections. The majority of these were in store, thus the displays allowed us to increase public access to collections as well as promote other museums.

New collection - A key collection for display was a newly acquired veterinary collection. We recruited four volunteers to help us clean and catalogue the objects. This required Conservator input to train the volunteers, assess the collection and support curatorial staff in managing at-risk items. It is a mixed collection including plastics, spirit specimens, osteology, metals, woods, archival material and volatile items such as x-rays and film.

Mixed displays - The variety in this collection needed consideration when curating the veterinary display. A mixed display was essential to explore the themes fully and needed assessment to ensure items were not put at risk.



The Horse Comes First; veterinary gallery display case containing the Robert's Collection of veterinary equipment.

Lessons learned

1. Planning is key but so is flexibility - mock-up case layouts as best you can, measure objects... then measure again, allow enough time for mount makers to access collection and make mounts. This timing is especially critical if you are going to display loan items.
2. Project management and communication - if possible have a designated project manager from the start responsible for communicating with the internal team and external contractors i.e. curator, conservator, fit-out teams and mount-makers. You'll need different things at different times and will have different immediate priorities.
3. Audience testing - this is a process that takes time but is well worth it. It provides an opportunity to test interest and comprehension of content and object display. Also to test the usability of interactives; both digital and mechanical. It gives confidence in the robustness of the display content and interactives and you can capture any potential issues before production and install. You also get an opportunity to build a relationship with schools and community groups - your future visitor audience and best advocates.
4. Display case design - where relevant make sure you are able to review case plans and design, when multiple parties are involved designs can evolve without everybody being aware.
5. New object displays - improving collections access may come with extra costs and additional time requirements.
6. Opening - it doesn't have to be perfect, only you will know. Opening is the start of a new beginning... and snagging!



The Maktoum Gallery of the Thoroughbred, which includes many loan specimens including spirit and dry specimens from the Hunterian Museum.

Overcoming challenges

New science displays - There was limited space and limited science in the previous Museum displays so we were very fortunate to be able to dedicate whole galleries to scientific topics. We were keen to provide different routes to engage with the content. To do this we used a variety of media; graphic panels, mechanical interactives and digital interactives. Natural science specimens were key to this holistic engagement approach and to providing real context to the new content. Particularly the exhibits in The Maktoum Gallery of the Thoroughbred which included displays themed around equine anatomy and physiology, equine evolution and genetics.