

DEWSBURY MUSEUM

A HISTORY

Dewsbury Museum is the oldest of Kirklees Museums and it's had a very chequered history. In 1893, Dewsbury Corporation bought a local beauty spot of 70 acres to turn into a public park. A local gardener, William Cox, was hired and, over the next two years, a total of £10,000 was spent on the designing and



laying out of the gardens. The mansion, Crow Nest Hall, was initially used as a parks depot but, from an early stage, a committee was formed to look into the possibility of establishing a museum. By the end of the year, it had been decided that 'the ground floor will be devoted to refreshments; on the first floor will be a room for the use of the Park Committee, also a reading room and a branch free library, with lavatory, etc. and the top floor is to be a museum.' The layout described here is fairly typical of museums in the late 19th Century.

The early days of the museum reflected the Victorian's desire to collect the weird and wonderful. In 1896, the local newspaper - The Dewsbury Reporter - told its readers that 'Honorary Curators are still preparing specimens for the public museum in the Mansion at Crow Nest Park. Recently they have had presented a case by Mr R Quick of the Horniman Museum, London, containing the following objects viz: - one pair Japanese Ivory Chopsticks, one pair Chinese chopsticks in case, Roman fresco coloured on plaster from an old house in London, fragments of Samian Ware (Roman); Medieval pottery fragments from London, bone bangles from India, Shell adze or implement from Bahama, two Cloisonne plates (Japanese) Coconut Spoon (Ceylon) and a Japanese 'Icoto' or dulcimer.' In other words, just the sort of collection to fascinate middle-class Victorians on wet, Sunday afternoons! By 1897, there were two rooms in use, largely displaying Egyptian and Ethnographic artefacts and Natural History specimens.



At the turn of the century, local history was considered a low priority but the Curators invested a great deal of energy and enthusiasm into collecting anything Egyptian. The trustees became members of the Egyptian Exploration Society and, today, the Kirklees Egyptology collections are unrivalled in a provincial museum, although they are now on display at Bagshaw Museum in Batley.

But, by 1910, this initial enthusiasm had waned; many of the original trustees had died or retired and the museum fell into a state of decline.

In 1937, the post of Honorary Curator was given to a Mr W Down, who was the History Master at Dewsbury's Wheelwright Boys Grammar School. He was particularly interested in local history and it is, largely, thanks to him that the Kirklees local history collections are so extensive. It took Mr Down 18 months to collect, catalogue and redisplay four rooms in the museum, creating a local history gallery, two galleries devoted to 'The Story of the Earth and The Story of Man' and another on animal and plant life.

By the 1960s, a professional Curator had been appointed but the museum was, once again, in decline and, in 1975, it was threatened with closure due to falling visitor figures. The top floor was converted for storage and the museum limped along for another eight years, with only two display rooms.

In 1983, the museum was forced to close temporarily due to serious maintenance problems. This meant that there was a chance to refurbish and rethink the displays. Kirklees Museums Service had a large collection of children's toys which were, at this time, in storage at Tolson Museum. These were brought out, taken to Dewsbury and Dewsbury Museum - the Museum of Childhood - was born.